

Sketchbooks Then and Now

Today sketchbooks are everywhere—tucked in backpacks and carried under the arms of artists the world over. It's easy to take for granted the existence of sketchbooks of all shapes, sizes and surfaces and hard to imagine a time when there were none at all. But throughout much of art history, the possession of a sketchbook—or any kind of book, for that matter—was



LEFT
French pocket sketchbook.

BELOW
Reyer and the Washer Woman
by Edgar Degas, ca. 1877, graphite, 20½ x 27½. Collection J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, California.

a rare privilege. The evolution of the sketchbook can be considered as important a development for early artists as the invention of tubes for oil paint was for later ones. Both innovations liberated artists from the studio and freed them to work en plein air. Today, artists, collectors and scholars have come to regard sketchbooks as works of art in their own right. Here, we look at this sketching revolution and consider a few of the many ways sketchbooks can play a role in your art.

SKETCHBOOKS THROUGHOUT HISTORY

Drawing existed long before paper did, and early drawings were made on surfaces such as slate or wood tablets that could be cleaned and reused. The earliest sketchbooks were handmade and consisted of a few sheets of prepared boxwood, papyrus, vellum or parchment. In some cases, assorted drawings created by a master would be collected and bound together as a “Model Book” to be preserved as a ref-

erence for the next generation of artists. Eventually drawing books made of rag paper began to be produced, but for many years they were expensive and used sparingly.

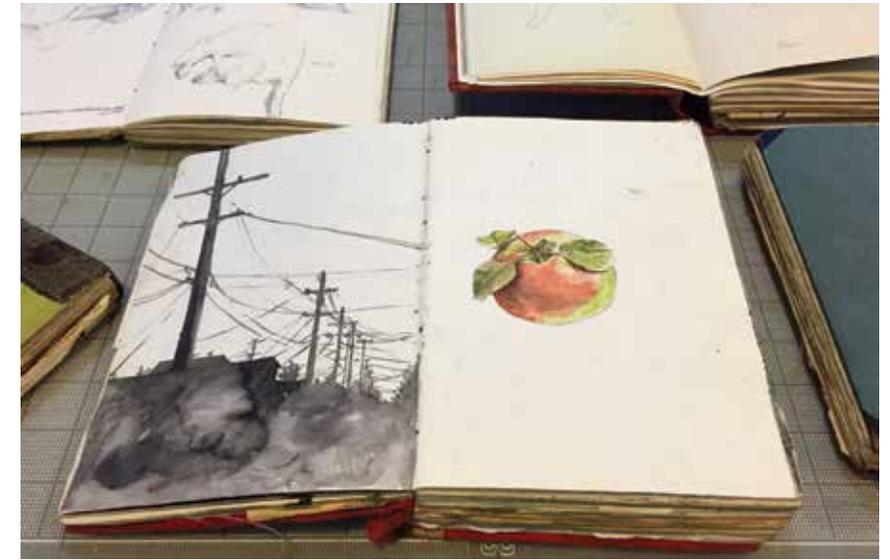
During the Renaissance artists began to use personal sketchbooks for various purposes. Leonardo filled volumes with scientific speculations, anatomical drawings, quick sketches and notes for paintings. His private journals were intended as just that—private. Leonardo often wrote in code or reverse lettering to keep his observations secret. Unfortunately, after his death many of his journals were disassembled and sold as separate sheets. The books that were kept intact are invaluable, allowing us to discern the chronology of Leonardo's ideas.

Over the ensuing centuries sketchbooks gradually became ubiquitous, and they have been crucial to the careers of innumerable artists. To take just one example, Picasso's sketchbooks seem to have suited his occasional practice of semi-automatically repeating drawings, evolving them in such small increments that they can almost be viewed in rapid succession like a child's flipbook. Picasso may have used this strategy when faced with a creative block, looking to find new ideas by rehearsing and perfecting old ones. His sketchbooks also indicate that his ideas did not necessarily fall neatly into the distinct stylistic periods suggested by some critics but instead flowed in a more cyclical way between old and new.

Technology now makes viewing master artists' sketchbooks easier than

RIGHT
Ink Studies
by Kirsten Deirup, 2015, ink on paper in Moleskine notebook, 8½ x 12.

BELOW
L'abdomen
by Sherry Camhy, 1998, graphite sketch in antique book, 7 x 11 x 2. Pages 197-198. In 1998 I began using a French anatomy book from 1902 as a sketchbook containing figure drawings.



it has ever been. Just like magic, we can flip through the pages of a master sketchbook on a computer, enlarging small areas to see them in great detail. For example, the Cambridge University Library allows free online access to the tiny watercolor sketchbook in which Conrad Martens worked while accompanying Charles Darwin aboard the HMS Beagle. And this summer several of Degas' sketchbooks can be digitally browsed at the Museum of Modern Art, in New York, as part of the exhibition “Edgar Degas: A Strange New Beauty.”



SKETCHBOOKS TODAY

The important thing about a sketchbook is not what it costs but whether it suits your individual artistic needs. It should be something you want to keep with you for drawing anywhere at any time.

Some artists use inexpensive sketchpads for practice. Others use bound sketchbooks for casual visual notations, for more serious studies or for completely finished images. Sketchbooks can also be private journals, where artists maintain ongoing commentaries and visual diaries. Opening an old sketchbook of this type can be like remembering a long-forgotten dream.

You can turn anything you have on hand into a sketchbook if need be—why not? When I was 10 years old I turned my math textbook into my first sketchbook, unbeknown to my teacher. Much later, I found an old French anatomy book in a thrift store and used it for a series of life drawings.

My first real sketchbook was a gift. I was attending a sketch class, and the artist sitting next to me asked, “Why are you drawing in a newsprint pad?” I said that it didn't matter what I used, as I was just practicing. At our

MATERIAL WORLD



Handmade sketchbook with signatures of mold-made rag paper.

next class, he handed me an elegant leather-bound sketchbook. I was terrified to draw in it at first, but that fear forced me to pay serious attention to every line, figure and composition. It mattered. I loved the fine feel of the paper under my pencil. I kept that sketchbook snugly in my back pocket until it was full.

CONSIDERATIONS

Here are a few things to keep in mind when shopping for and working in a new sketchbook:

- The papers used in different sketchbooks vary greatly in their color, thickness and texture, among other factors. Before purchasing a new

sketchbook, you want to determine whether the paper will suit your needs. Read the manufacturer's description carefully, then open up the book and feel the paper yourself. Check both sides of a sheet—they may feel different.

- Test the sturdiness of the front and back covers. Having a firm support

behind your paper is important when working on location.

- Check whether pages can be removed neatly—you may want to be able to pull out individual drawings. On the contrary, you may prefer a permanently bound sketchbook from which it's almost impossible to take pages out. Note that with some books you may be able to remove a whole group of sheets, known as a *signature*, together in one piece, leaving no sign that pages are missing.
- You can make your own unique books from scratch using any kind of paper—lined, unlined, manufactured, handmade, printed, cut, torn, gesso-coated, painted or collaged. You can even create a small sketchbook with just an 8½"-x-11" sheet of paper. (See demonstration, page TK.)
- Make your sketchbook your best friend. Don't leave home without it. And remember, if your sketchbook is just for you, spelling and drawing mistakes don't matter! ❖



The binding of a spiral-bound sketchbook.

DEMONSTRATION >>

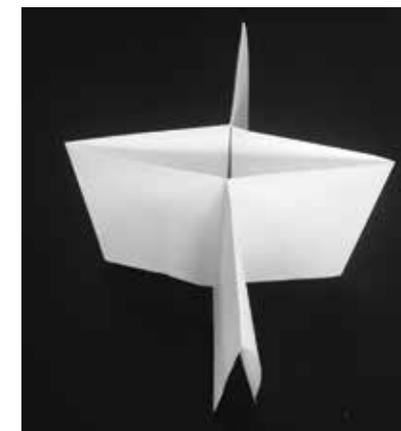
A Miniature Sketchbook From Scratch



- 1** Fold an 8½"-x-11" sheet of paper in half three times so that it is divided into eight sections of equal size. Crease firmly.



- 2** Unfold the sheet to half-size. Make a cut from the folded side to the center crease.



- 3** Gently pull the newly cut segment apart and stand the paper up on the cut ends. Push the folds together to make a star shape.

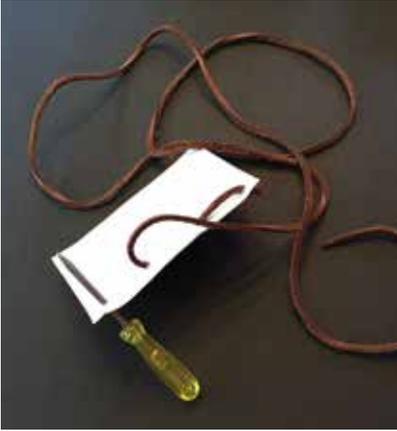


- 4** Press the folds together, resulting in a six-page "book" with a front and back cover.

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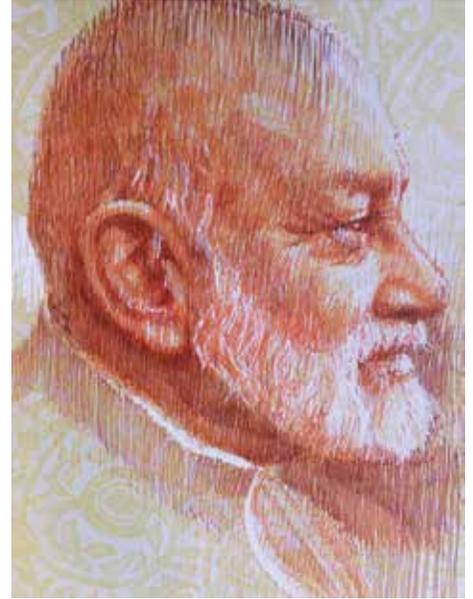


5 To make a twelve page book, cut to separate the folded edges of each page. Fix the “binding” with staples or by making holes along the folded edge and sewing pages together.



6 You now have a miniature 12-page book ready for sketching. You can create larger books using this process by beginning with a larger sheet of similar proportions.

Sketchbooks by Emily and Arielle Ragals, 2016.



Arthur

by Janet Cook, 2016, pen-and-ink on patterned Indian parchment paper, 7 x 5.

Cook created this drawing in a sketchbook handmade by Sanjeev Bothra.