

In Search of Quality

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Pursuing quality in your work will naturally and automatically lead to the development of your own personal style. Style is a by-product of quality. It displays and exhibits your character, your internal self-directed actions and decisions to take your work as far as you possibly can in the direction you want it to go. It is quite naturally the original genuine expression of who you really are. Art is nothing if not a personal, intimate view of subjective choices that you make. Don't try to 'develop style'. Try to make excellent work - your style will take care of itself. It will appear all on its own.

How does having an established name come to increase the value of work? Is this fair? Reasonable? Logical? People often mistakenly believe that it is the name itself that creates value, but this is not so. The name is the mechanism by which an understanding is conveyed – it is not the name itself that confers value, but that which the name represents. Your name comes to be synonymous with the quality of your work, whatever that is. Quality is an adjective that describes the essence or internal nature of a thing or a person, poor as well as excellent. In this way, an artist may transcend a category of work, and *become* the category: when people say that they own a Stankard, or a Chihuly, or a Pollack, we know what they mean. The name has gained a currency and recognition in the given field, and carries with it the quality and nature of his or her work.

Quality is the means to your central theme. Without technical mastery, and freedom of ability, your idea will be at least partially masked by incomplete skills and poor execution. Your viewer will be thinking about how you've done it rather than what the work is about. Only when you've mastered the technique to the point where you're not even thinking about it, can you give all your attention to expression and development of ideas. This has been referred to as 'making technique transparent'. The technique exists in order to serve the idea. If your viewer is transfixed by the technique, and misses the point in the work, then the work has not succeeded on its highest level. If the goblet is unevenly blown out, or the figure has a muscle in the wrong spot, or there is a bubble or spot in some obvious place, then the viewer's eye and sub-conscious mind will be drawn to that, rather than to the central idea you're presenting. Quality as mastery is the *beginning* point, from which effective expression of ideas can spring.

Originality is over-rated. Effective communication of an idea or image is most powerfully affected by the skill with which the idea is presented. Technical skill itself is no substitute for mentally, culturally, or perceptually challenging work...but having the skill set with which to execute the inner content and idea *driving* the work is a necessary prerequisite. The greatest improvisational musicians have a profound mastery of scales, arpeggios and basic technical skills.

If your audience views your work, and exclaims on how well you made it, or how well done it is, the work has not yet succeeded. You need to attain such a level of mastery that they see beyond the technique straight into the heart of what the work is about.

Excellence is the minimum acceptable standard which is required for entry into the world of ideas and design, in order to have your ideas considered on their merits. You need to master the vocabulary of your medium, which will lead to discovery of your voice, which is a tone or style. This is not so much a goal or objective but a natural byproduct of consistent effort and learning, as you explore and develop the work. If you're going to dig a well, dig a deep one – you'll have a much better choice of striking water.

Can your work pass the simplicity test? Can you do excellent, simple work? It's easy to cover something with lots of fancy special effects, but the simple piece that is obviously, inherently true is much more powerful, and its effects will last and last. This is much harder to do, because everything is showing. The artist and the work are much more exposed and vulnerable. You don't have the luxury of filler or fluff - everything that is there needs to be true to your vision. If you don't have a clue, that will show! The vision and the idea driving the work are fully on display. What *is* there needs to be honest, true, accurate, and clean.

There is an interesting hidden disincentive to making your best work that most people are not aware of or do not admit to themselves... Once you've made work that sets a new standard of quality, you will be held to that new, higher standard, by your audience and your inner self. *You'll* know that you can be doing it better. Once other people know, they'll not let you get by on doing less than that well. The first time you do something a new and better way, your enthusiasm and adrenaline will carry you, and you'll be jazzed at the new work, or new quality of work. Once you've settled down, though, you'll need to take a good look at the effects that adhering to this new standard will have on you, and your business model. You'll have some decisions to make, and you need to be ready to make them for the right reasons, so that you can be proud of your work and yourself.

Although there are very nearly infinite choices when it comes to taste and style, in most fields there can be agreed upon a series of standards against which a work in that field may be measured. These are by no means absolute. It is completely possible for a work to utterly fail in one or several of these respects, but stellar quality in some one or several of the other aspects can propel it beyond the failure which a narrower definition might accord it.

Is the work structurally sound?

Aesthetically appealing?

Conceptually interesting?

Challenging?

Original?

Well executed?

Is it as good as, or better than, similar work?

Standards by which work will be judged depend mainly on the definition of purpose to which the work will be subjected. A well made figure that is excellent by sculptural



Quality is the classic come-back to being knocked off. You, as the originator, have an immeasurable advantage over the copyist. The copyist almost never does as good a quality job, as they are interested in making the work for a different reason. They seek not the expression of an idea, but simply to copy it. They do not want to create, or explore, but to capitalize on the efforts of someone else. These two motivations for creating and producing are diametrically opposed, and will inevitably lead to very different outcomes...

and anatomical standards might well be a complete failure if it is critical that it be a certain size or configuration. An object that is going to withstand a great deal of physical handling will need to be stronger and suited for that purpose. If a work is considered for an architectural installation, it will have to be of a certain scale, so that it has a substantial presence for the audience in the public venue in which it is located.

You need to be committed to the category in which you've chosen to work, and the quality standards of that category. Commitment to a category implies that you've done enough homework to find out what it is that is important to the people

who collect that kind of work. If you're doing marbles, you need to have full commitment to sphericity; goblets need to be stable when filled with liquid; and paperweights have to have a flat surface on the bottom so that they don't roll off the table.

Quality is important in the pragmatic world of business, as well. As important as any deadline ever was, I've never known a customer who was happy to get a job done on time that wasn't as good as it was supposed to be. Making sloppy work so that you can sell it for less doesn't work well, either. I know that I'd much rather pay a higher price for better quality, and many people are the same.

The question should never be, “If I put all that effort into it, will anyone be able to afford it?” Think rather, “Can I make it good enough so that they’ll want it?” There is always a buyer for quality work, somewhere.

Then you have to think about your own quality of life, and integrity. Would you rather be pumping out shallow, sloppy garbage, or really putting yourself 100% into everything that you do? Do you want to challenge yourself, or not really try very hard? Are you more satisfied by working through a difficult problem and figuring it out, or by just not bothering to begin with?

Some common problems with producing quality work are using poor materials, rushing the work to get it done by a deadline, having no consistent standard, and poor design – either aesthetic or functional. All of these problems will be magnified when you’re working with a group of people doing work with or for you. If the work coming out of the shop has your name on it, then you need to be sure that it all meets whatever you’ve set as the standards for quality. In order to accomplish this, you’ll need to: provide your team with models to work from, and which you can hold them to; take the time to carefully inspect everything personally before it goes out; and have the commitment to send back or re-do the work that isn’t up to snuff. A hypothetical standard that isn’t implemented does not exist.

When you work with people at a distance, the quality of the work that you send will to a large extent determine the quality of your relationship with them, and how well they’re able to sell your work. Many, many artists think, “Oh, it’s only consignment...I’ll send them *this*.”

If *this* is anything less than your very best work, then you’ve put a huge obstacle in the way of succeeding with that gallery.

To make consignment work well, you’ll need to cherry pick your very best pieces, and be sure that those are what you send out to represent you. Galleries have a very highly developed eye and sensitivity to recognize the quality of what you send them, and if they sense that you’ve sent anything less than your very best, they’ll not be bending over to help make it work for you.

You may find it helpful to identify someone whose opinion you trust, an informed opinion based in a knowledge of and understanding of your field. I know that I do. Over time, you’ll come to know clearly and unambiguously, which pieces are your very best work, which are pretty good, which are so-so, and which really should be trashed. I find it most difficult to be objective right after I’ve completed the piece. It’s often helpful to have a time period between making the piece, and judging it. Sometimes, I like the piece more the next day. With hot glass, it’s important to be able to separate successful process from excellence of result. It can be a very fine line that distinguishes between excellence and mediocrity, and we need to have the gonads to admit the difference.

I photograph my own work, and find that to be a useful step in understanding what I’ve done.

The camera lens is very objective, and shows things for what they really are, apart from the heat of the moment of creation. Looking at a piece from all those different angles, coming in close for detail shots, changing the lighting and backgrounds all help me come up with an objective point of view.

Some pieces are much more photogenic than others, and if we can identify what makes them work so well in images, we’ll understand something about what makes them excellent. Making work that we like is important. It is even more important to understand what it is that we like about it, so that we can apply that to future work.

Don’t hold back from doing the very best work that you are capable of. It’s the only way that you’ll feel satisfied, and the only way that you’ll continue to grow. Going beyond what you think you can do will take you places that you never imagined, and that kind of exploration will make it crystal clear to you where you’re meant to be, and where you’re meant to go. Excellence: ‘ex’ means to go beyond, or out of; ‘cell’ is a unit defined by its boundaries. Thus, excellence can be understood as going beyond the boundaries of what was previously understood to be the limitations of a given topic, medium or type of work. Quality is the inner essence or nature of a person, place or thing...know that all you do will serve to define you, so bear that in mind when making your work and sending it out to represent you to the world.

To see more of Milon’s artwork, please visit www.milontownsend.com. For information on classes with Milon Townsend, visit www.thebluemoonpress.com.