

If You Open It, They Will Come...Not

Running a decorative painting shop or home studio is an incredibly rewarding passion. Bringing the decorative arts to an area that has no arts program is a wonderful mission. And, teaching decorative painting classes, forming bonds with students and customers and inspiring the minds and brushes of those that walk into your shop is a lofty and obtainable goal. However, it isn't always that easy, especially in today's decorative painting market. As a result, many of us have the space, the inspiration and the commitment to bringing decorative painting to our community but we only have one thing missing, students.

Nothing is more frustrating than opening the doors of our studios to the public only to find that the students don't come. It is hard to understand how an activity that we are so passionate about doesn't reach the public. If we love to paint and create as much as we do, why don't other people have the same desire? How could we possibly offer the opportunity to paint wonderful works of art, learn new painting techniques and have a fabulous social experience only to discover that the class has few students. The frustration is huge and the disappointment is very real.

To do something about this problem we need to pinpoint the cause of the problem. Ten or fifteen years ago decorative painting was very popular. There were many shops and home studios and most of them had a stable student base. What has changed? First and foremost, the home-based arts tend to be very cyclical. One year quilting might be very popular only to be replaced by scrapbooking a few years later. Painting falls into that cycle and during the 80's and 90's painting was on the upswing but now we are struggling with a failing market. Secondly, during the "heyday" of decorative painting a class would fulfill a need to fill one's leisure time with a meaningful activity. Today much of our leisure time is spent on the computer. There are many reasons for the demise of our market but the truth is that all of this doesn't matter. What still exists is an art form that is rich in history, fulfilling to the soul and still fills our social needs. It is our job to bring people to it. But, how do we get the students in to our shop?

If we wish to build a successful program the first thing that we must do is raise public awareness. Our communities need to know what we offer and we need to create the feeling that those that aren't part of it are really missing something. This is indeed easier said than done but there are many things that we can do to increase our footprint in our communities. First of all it is very important that you do lots of painting demonstrations in public. But there is a caveat here...when you are demonstrating do not paint your nicest most evolved pieces as they will impress but they won't help you gain students. It is important that your demonstrations are simple and look very "doable" by the average person. When we first started doing public demonstrations I would demonstrate Rosemaling. The viewers would "ooh

and aah” but they wouldn’t sign up for classes. It looked too hard and not approachable by the average person. When we changed our public demonstrations, our enrollment changed. We started to demonstrate easy flowers that could be accomplished quickly. We even did some very easy “make it, take its” with people that had never picked up a brush before. They painted something that looked like a flower and they were delighted. Many of them signed up for classes because our demonstrations empowered them. Now the question arises...where are the best places to do these public demonstrations?

We have been very pro-active in our community in terms of recruiting students and we have been successful. Following is a list of some places that we have demonstrated and free places that we have advertised.

- Public Library
- Local Shopping Mall
- Local Farmers Market
- Women’s Club meetings
- Local Fair or Carnival
- Senior Citizens Centers

Not one of these venues pulled in a lot of students but collectively these demonstrations have filled our studio with students. Keep in mind that a few students that are involved in your studio for years will help your business grow.

A few recruiting opportunities are so important that I have decided to isolate them and talk about them separately for these experiences have brought many students into our studio.

In our shop we have a yearly “open house”. We coordinate this with a local art show that is held at our court house and we hand out flyers at the art show which invite people to our shop. We have snacks and drinks and we also have tables that are set up to do some very easy “make it, take its”. We invite our current students to join us as we socialize, paint and demonstrate. The atmosphere is very festive and we are able to interest a lot of people in our classes. I do need to take a moment and talk about advertising. When we first opened our studio we put a lot of money into advertising. We got some students through our advertisements but not many. We have decided to continue advertising but on a limited basis. We want to have our shop represented in our local newspaper but we also realize that we will not get many people this way. Art is a “hands-on” activity and what interests people the most is visual. Get out and show people what you can do and what they can do and the students will come.

Finally, there is one demonstration and recruitment venue that can’t be overstressed. Demonstrating at local art/craft shows has yielded us most of our students. The people that

attend these events are people that already have an interest in home décor and in arts and crafts. In addition these festivals are very well attended and provide exposure to many potential students. I recommend that you have a display of many of your painted pieces. Do not display only your most difficult pieces as many may view this as amazing but unobtainable. Have a nice mix ranging from very basic, beginner pieces to a few very advanced pieces. It is important to show a pathway of growth through your work. In addition it is important that you be demonstrating all of the time. It is these demonstrations that bring people in.

In closing I would like to say that these are difficult times in the decorative painting market but not impossible times. There are many opportunities for you to build your studio and develop a nice base of students. We have had many experiences where people are upset because they can't recruit students and their shops or home studios are failing. When we discuss things it becomes apparent that they have not actively tried to recruit students. Often they believe that they are doing all that they can, but in truth, they are not. You can be successful and you can have a thriving shop that has the energy and passion of lots of students. Believe in yourself and actively recruit students. Trust me...they will come.