

Mastering the Mural: Illustrator Emily Balsley's Tips for Oversized Art

Creating artwork can be challenging enough when it's done in a traditional format. Blow up those designs into something more life-size, and the feat can feel downright daunting. Professional illustrator Emily Balsley (<http://emilybalsley.com/>) knows this all too well. As an artist who's drawn fun visuals for books, magazines, custom portraits, and more, Balsley had to start thinking on a grander scale as more clients began requesting murals.

Balsley's first big piece was in 1996 as a Bachelor of Fine Arts student at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, where she painted a cow, seedlings, cuts of meat, and lettering on a 30-foot long wall for a Future Farmers of America mural. Now a full-time freelance illustration artist, her mural gigs have included a *Wizard of Oz*-inspired nursery wall, a chalk-painted 20-foot restaurant menu, and a custom mural at a healthy foods eatery.

Read on for Balsley's top tips to tackle these giant projects and learn how they can apply to art in any medium, shape, or size.

1. Get in the Client's Head

When she's first approached about painting a mural, Balsley does what she would do with any client project: Research. "I find out as much as possible about the client and their business," she says, often asking about aesthetic, target customer, and needs. "If they have a Pinterest board, even better. In order to create the best custom mural possible, I really need to be able to get into their heads. This is something that they'll be staring at for a long time, after all!" To work as efficiently as possible, Balsley also addresses the logistics of the project up front, including whether the space will be prepped and painted, and if supplies such as a projector, ladder, and scaffolding will be provided.



Image courtesy of Emily Balsley

2. Assess the Space

Where the artwork will be displayed is just as important as *what* the artwork will be. Balsley recommends taking very exact measurements, including noting the architecture of the space, such as doors, vents, soffits, and windows to work around. “Once I have all the measurements, I recreate the space on the computer as a two-dimensional shape so that I know the exact space of my ‘canvas,’” says Balsley, who then prints a few copies of the “empty wall” for sketching purposes. “If my measurements are accurate, it will allow me to create a fully integrated design that I can scan and email to the client for feedback. Once the concept is approved, Balsley creates a detailed color mock-up, the template from which she will work, in Photoshop. Since she’ll likely be projecting this image onto the wall, accuracy is key.



Image courtesy of Emily Balsley

3. Equip Yourself with the Right Materials

In addition to buying paint, Balsley relies on her toolbox filled with must-have items. “A measuring tape and level ensure the design is proportional and perfectly square,” she says. “For my personal painting style, I prefer student-grade, flat-shaped paintbrushes in several sizes.” Balsley also uses chalk, brushes, an apron, and knee pads, plus a bucket of water and rags for easy cleanup.

4. Project the Design (Or Use Grids)



Image courtesy of Emily Balsley

Balsley prefers using a projector to place and create the initial drawing using common chalk, which washes off easily. Stencils and grids are other options when a projector isn't available or a space is too small to project the large design, but both come with their own drawbacks. "The space at my last job was too small to project, so I had to use the grid transfer method to aid in freehanding the image onto the wall," she says. "It ended up working just fine, but it was more time-consuming and there was more pressure to get it 'just right,' which can be tough at such a large scale."

5. Look at the Design Strategically

Similar to how she creates illustrations, Balsley assesses the execution of the design with a strategic eye. "For example, if there are areas with several layers, I need to start with the bottom layer color so it has ample time to dry," she says. "Depending on the base wall color, some areas may need multiple coats before it is opaque. Larger swatches of color generally need to be painted before the fine details."



Image courtesy of Emily Balsley

6. Clean Up

Once everything is dry, Balsley wraps up the wall mural by wiping down the entire space with a damp rag to remove any leftover chalk lines or dust. After a few touch-ups, her work is ready to be admired for years to come.



Image courtesy of Emily Balsley

With each mural masterpiece, Balsley sees just how similar her big art is to her smaller stuff. “There will always be constraints, limitations, and challenges. Whether you are typesetting around three photos in a magazine spread, designing a web banner that has an extremely horizontal format, or creating a motif for a ceramic mug — it is important you know the measurements and proportions of your ‘canvas’ so that you can make the design as integrated as possible,” she says.

Like any art, remember that composition is instrumental at any scale, with emphasis on contrast, negative space (<http://www.shutterstock.com/blog/8-tips-for-maximizing-your-designs-with-negative-space>), and color balance. “I’ll often shrink something down to a thumbnail to ensure there is maximum impact,” says Balsley. “These characteristics hold true even when designing something the size of a room. Creating a detailed digital mock-up before painting ensures the mural will translate well when scaled up to size.”

If you’re ready to take on a “big” project, Balsley’s final tip is to take care of your body. “You wouldn’t think it, but because of the large scale, painting a mural is very physical.” She has spent long hours standing, crouching, reaching, twisting, and kneeling. “Take breaks, drink lots of water, and use scaffolding and knee pads if possible. When it’s complete, be sure to reward yourself with a trip to the masseuse. Your body will thank you!”