

Contemplation

The Sting of Criticism

I have been stamping and part of the stamping community for over eighteen years. One thing that has always impressed me about our community is how supportive stampers are of each other's work. In my experience, when one stamper shows another stamper something they have created, the response is almost always very supportive and positive. We don't tear each other's work down and even when a piece has some problems in our own eyes, we usually will find something good to say about it, often not mentioning the problems. This overwhelmingly positive response from fellow stampers is part of what makes stamping and sharing with other stampers such a positive and empowering experience.

Recently I came across an article on "*How to Respond Effectively to Design Criticism*" on a graphic design web site. This particular web site (Smashing Magazine) has absolutely nothing to do with rubber stamping; instead its focus is on graphic design and web design. The world of these professional design folks is a bit harsher than our stamping world. Designers have to take criticism of their work from their bosses, coworkers, clients and the public. Hours of work can be shot down in minutes. They are creating their work for business and so what they do is under a lot of scrutiny.

The point of the Smashing Magazine article was that "*criticism often presents an excellent opportunity to grow as a designer.*" The author made his case and then looked at how to accept criticism, how to separate useful constructive criticism from negative or misguided attacks, how to dig down to get more helpful information and how to treat the critic. If you are online, I'd recommend this article, even if you aren't getting criticism on your stamping; it could apply just as well to many situations at work or elsewhere when something we do is criticized. (There are links to other interesting articles at the end of their article too.) www.smashingmagazine.com

After reading this article, I got to thinking about criticism and stamping and how so often we don't critique each other's work in any way. Usually the only time I see this is (and it's rare) when someone is working on a project and

isn't quite happy with it and posts it to an online group asking for suggestions. You might also see it in some stamping classes or clubs. When approached this way, stampers seem to feel more open to make suggestions and they usually appear to be specific and helpful without being unkind.

I have found through my experience with creating VSN that criticism is a both painful and helpful. Sometimes people are less than tactful in the way they criticize and that can hurt. It can take your breath away! Sometimes people are not specific about their criticism. "*I don't like it*" gives you no place to go after all. But when people are willing to go a little deeper and explore WHY they don't like something with you, that criticism can sometimes be incredibly useful. I have experienced this many times over the years that I've been publishing VSN. While positive feedback pumps me up and keeps me putting out VSN month after month, constructive criticism has pushed me to do things or improve things in VSN that I probably wouldn't have done otherwise. It's just too easy to get into a comfortable rhythm and do things the same way again and again without really looking hard at them. Sometimes you need a little kick to see that something could be better.

And that takes me back to stamping. I'm wondering if our lack of criticism in stamping is always a good thing. Yes, it makes us feel good and is empowering, letting us feel safe taking risks and doing new things. I would hate to lose that. But I'm wondering if by not having our work critiqued, whether we are missing out on a chance for our work to grow? Maybe criticism is the fertilizer, smelly and unpleasant sometimes, but what is really needed to make our work flower into something better. By not criticizing, are we stunting our artistic growth?

I am thinking about looking more closely at criticism in stamping in a future issue of VSN and would welcome your thoughts and comments on this topic. Do you ask for criticism of your stamp art? Do you receive unsolicited criticism?

How do you handle criticism? Has criticism made your stamp art better or has it made you less likely to show your work to others? Or do you simply ignore it? Does criticism stifle your creativity or push you?

How important is someone else's opinion of your stamp art to you? Are there some people whose opinion and/or criticism is more important to you than others?

Have you had positive experiences with criticism of your stamp art? Negative experiences? Have you given criticism to other stampers yourself? How did you do it? Was it a positive experience?

Please write or email me with your thoughts on any or all of these questions. I may even quote you in the article!

Good wishes,

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