The Only Sketchbook You’ll Ever Need

A review of the “fair and square” illo sketchbook.

By Amber Safeer

If you are an artist like me, chances are you are consistently in the market for some sort of drawing pad or sketchbook. Maybe you’re a die-hard believer in [Moleskine sketchbooks](https://www.moleskine.com/en-us/shop/notebooks/art-collection/sketchbook/), or perhaps you’re the type to just grab a piece of lined notebook paper and go to town (personally, I have been both). However, none can compare to the beauty that is the [illo premium square sketchbook](https://www.illosketchbook.com/sketchbooksandmarkers/illo-sketchbook). Out of all the sketchbooks I have encountered throughout my artist journey, this one has had a lasting impact on the way I work view the process of sketching altogether.

A black and white sketchbook with a elastic band

Description automatically generated

*Product picture of the illo sketchbook 8”x8”, courtesy of* [*illosketchbook.com*](https://www.illosketchbook.com/sketchbooksandmarkers/illo-sketchbook)*.*

**Notable Features/Specifications:**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Type** | **Size** | **Price** |
| Pocket | 4.5”x4.5” | $12.75 |
| Standard | 8”x8” | $16.75 |
| XL | 10”x10” | $24.99 |

All variations include:

* Durable, grey cover
* Elastic Enclosure
* Ribbon Marker
* Back Page Pocket
* 112 Pages
* 122lb - 180 gsm

**The Extras**

While I personally had the standard size sketchbook, the various sizes that illo offers provides artists with options when it comes to the kind of art they want to make – do they need something small and portable, or something larger for more finalized pieces? Moreover, the ribbon marker ensures that you never lose your place, while the elastic enclosure guarantees that your sketchbook stays shut, even if it is bursting at the seams with creativity. Another little surprise – the back page pocket – also allows artists to keep their loose artworks in a safe space.

**The Paper**

My personal favorite feature, however, must be the paper itself. With 112 pages of 122lb paper, this sketchbook is *thick* and can handle anything from pencils, to markers, to paints. If you’re unsure of how to think about the [weight of the paper](https://thomasgroupprinting.com/how-is-paper-weight-measured/#:~:text=When%20it%20comes%20to%20pounds,material%20the%20paper's%20made%20from.), picture it this way: if you had a stack of 500 sheets of paper in its standard sheet size (presumably 8”x8”), it would weigh 122 pounds. For reference, your typical printer paper weighs in at about a 20lb paperweight, while a thicker watercolor paper ranges around 140lb. Essentially, the greater the paperweight, the thicker the paper, and the less likely it will buckle to moisture, meaning that the illo sketchbook paper is great for multimedia.

Additionally, illo’s square paper shape is quite unusual in the realm of sketchbooks, however the ratio makes the pages an *ideal* candidate for Instagram pictures. The pages are also “[perfect bound](https://soloprinting.com/blog/saddle-stitch-vs-perfect-bound/),” meaning that the paper and cover are glued together at the spine. While some people may prefer the way you can fold spiral bound sketchbooks, I find that perfect bounds allow you to create the most seamless full-page spreads, and the illo sketchbook lies flat to ensure that the entire layout can be photographed appropriately.

A sketchbook with drawings of birds

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*An illo sketchbook spread of bird illustrations using alcohol-based markers by DrawingWiffWaffles on YouTube.*

**The Cover**

Aside from the inside of the book, I adore the front and back cover of the illo sketchbook. Unlike some other brands such as [Strathmore](https://www.strathmoreartist.com/draw-sketch/400-series-toned-sketch), the illo sketchbook features a removable paper logo and a dark grey, blank cover – a perfect canvas for an artist. With its durability, the cover can easily be painted on or decorated with stickers to add a bit of personality to what appears to be a rather dull book.

A drawing of a person with flowers on her head

Description automatically generatedA hand holding a sketchbook

Description automatically generated

*Side by side images of a painted front and back cover on an illo sketchbook, by* [*DrawingWiffWaffles on YouTube*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yM2xErDdKYo)*.*

**Are there *any* Cons?**

Despite my love for this sketchbook, it is only fair that I be completely transparent about its capabilities and shortcomings. Throughout my time using this sketchbook, the only “poor” thing worth noting is how the paper handles alcohol-based markers. While it doesn’t buckle or leak onto the next pages (for the most part), the ink does bleed through to the back of the page you are working on. For some, this is a *major* flaw, as marker-based artists want to use the sketchbook to the fullest, not only half of the pages.

A hand holding a book

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*Side by side images of a marker illustration viewed from the front and back of the page, by* [*Oliver’s Antics on YouTube*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdxOkvmoWu8)*.*

However, I argue that this shouldn’t be a glaring issue, because the book is used for *sketching*, not necessarily final designs. If an artist really wanted to have multiple finalized artworks using markers, then they should invest in a marker pad, not a sketchbook. Moreover, I think the bleeding of the ink can create fun shapes and patterns that spark even more creativity, only adding to the greatness of the sketchbook. If the transfer of marker does bother you that much though, it can be a good incentive to utilize sticky notes, washi tape, stickers, and other materials to cover the marker while filling the sketchbook in a unique way.

**Takeaways**

While some may classify illo sketchbooks as overhyped or overrated, I believe that the illo sketchbook gets exactly the recognition it deserves. From its fair price to stellar quality, it is impressive how illo beats out its older competitors despite being relatively new (around 2017) to the paper game. If I had to rate it, I would give the illo sketchbooks a 9/10. Yes, I have almost nothing but praise for the product, however I would like to see some more variety in the product in later years, perhaps in the form of toned tan, charcoal, or Bristol paper. Additionally, while I see a lot of the features of the sketchbook as pros, in the end it is very subjective to what the individual artist wants. For example, the perfect binding can be infuriating to those who wish to tear out pages in their sketchbook, and the paper may be *too* thick for just simple daily pencil sketches. Overall, though, I believe it is absolutely worth the investment. If you’re anything like me, once you try out illo, you’ll never look back.