

CHAPTER 5

Entrepreneurship and Small Business

Paint by Numbers

Gamblin Artists Colors turns feelings into a palette of hues popular with the likes of David Hockney

by Douglas Gantenbein

Martha and Robert Gamblin's work hangs in some of the world's top art museums. But don't bother looking for their names on gallery walls.

The Gamblins toil behind the scenes, manufacturing some of the world's finest oil paints. Each year, Gamblin Artists Colors in Portland, Ore., ships more than 500,000 tubes and cans of paint in some 150 colors to artists and supply stores worldwide. Leading painters such as David Hockney and Chuck Close swear by them. "They make colors other companies just don't," says Wolf Kahn, a West Brattleboro (Vt.) landscape painter whose work is on display in museums nationwide.

Robert Gamblin was a struggling oil painter when he founded the company. Determined to make a living in the art world, he began mixing paints in his garage in the early 1980s, picking up fans along the way, before launching the company in 1987 with his wife, Martha. Now, with 15 employees and

\$3 million in sales, the company creates colors in specially designed high-speed mixers. Linseed oil and ground-up minerals are fed into the machines, then run through a series of metal rollers, which results in a brilliant paste—a technique that's 150 years old. "What we do is make essences of emotions that are reflected in colors," says Robert Gamblin, 51. "Then we put them into tubes."

Martha, 50, runs the factory with a somewhat less poetic approach. Computers track every bag of pigment and every tube of paint, allowing the company to run a just-in-time inventory system. The paints retail for \$10 to \$16 per tube. Sales have been increasing at about 15% annually. Earlier this year, the company introduced Gamblin Conservation Colors, a special line designed for restoring old paintings—which are used by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the National Gallery in London.

But even as they help restore the past, the Gamblins keep an eye on the future. Each fall, Martha pores through design magazines, searching for the latest color schemes. That's because art buyers will soon want paintings to go with newly redecorated rooms. Who knows? Perhaps you have a Gamblin on your own living room wall.

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