



## **Creating Art: A Metaphor for Living Life**

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It's been said that art is the visual expression of the human experience. Art can also be a metaphor for life. If you pay attention, you'll notice the practice of art mirrors the living of life in many ways. As such it can be used as a tool for self-expression, self-transformation, and self-exploration. By consciously watching the way you work, you have the opportunity to view the way in which you interact with the rest of the world on a microscopic level.

Your first relationship is with yourself. YOU are the most important element in all your creative endeavors. Always remember this! Remember this before, during, and after your projects. Your whole body comes into play when you create. You use it to move around your subject matter and your piece, to think up your ideas, to moderate your time spent, and to critique your work. Please remember to use it to enjoy and encourage your work as well. You have an eye for what feels right and what doesn't. Use your heart when making decisions as well as your eyes. Use the eye of your heart to watch the five year old within you paint. Then feel and encourage her/his joy in the work as you create.

Your next relationship is with your materials. Use the best paper for your project. As Gordon MacKenzie points out in *The Watercolorist's Essential Notebook*, "Life is too short to paint on cheap paper." The type of paper you choose dictates the way in which the paint is absorbed and the results you'll receive. Experiment with a variety of papers to decide what works best for the way in which you work. Please see the handout on papers for more specific information.

Watercolor brushes are another of the tools you'll choose for your work. The very best brushes are handmade Kolinsky Red Sables. They're characterized by a soft, thick strength that holds a lot of pigment and water. They will keep a fine point, even when fully loaded. They're also the most expensive brushes, made from hair of the tails of Siberian martens (mammals related to weasels). Red and pure sable brushes are not as fine or springy as Kolinsky, nor as expensive, but they make fine watercolor brushes. When possible, buy genuine sable or a good sabeline in your smaller sizes (6 or 8 rounds) and try a Winsor Newton Sceptre brush (a sable/synthetic blend) in size 12 or 14 round. Robert Simmons also makes a good synthetic White Sable brush. You'll want 3-4 good brushes, and you'll use them more than all the others in your holder. You'll also want a 1-3" flat brush for doing washes. Almost any kind of brush will do here; I've even seen people use house painter's brushes.

Whatever brush you use, always be sure to clean it after each use, and dry it flat or in a drip-dry holder that allows the bristles to hang down without touching anything. Never allow your brush to stand on its head in water, the point may be blunted, and the handle can swell. In addition, the glue holding the bristles into the ferrule will loosen if allowed to stay wet. For this reason I don't recommend you dry your brush standing on its handle with the bristles pointed up; dry it flat.

You'll also want to learn what I call the Language of the Brush. The ways in which you hold the brush, the strokes you make with it, along with the colors you choose, all go into conveying the feeling or a thought you wish to express. Long flowing brush strokes might suggest movement, ease, grace, even love. Short, staccato strokes made with a dry brush convey more tension and a different kind of movement.

Watercolor has many glorious qualities. One of my favorites is the ability to express motion or movement. I use this to my advantage whenever I can by being aware of the direction my brush strokes take. For example, I direct my brush to follow the lines of growth in the flowers I paint. When painting a hibiscus, I start either at the center of the flower and paint toward the edge, or I place my brush at the flower's edge and paint toward the middle. The only time I paint willy-nilly without concern for direction is when I'm doing the under painting, and even then I'm often aware of the direction my strokes are taking. All of this is done very deliberately with the intention of showing growth or movement. As a result, the shadows I create also follow the lines of movement of the flower.

The paints you use are completely up to you. I use a variety of manufacturers colors, primarily Maimeri, a professional grade paint made in Italy. They were my first introduction to professional paints and I'm hooked on some of their basic colors. I trust them to give me bright, colorfast, clean, clear colors. That's important to me because I like my finished paintings to be bright, clean, and clear. If you start with good color, you have a better chance of keeping it bright. I also use Daniel Smith, Daler Rowney, and Cheap Joe's paints because of the various colors they produce.

If you want to keep your colors clear, be aware of the temperature of the colors you're using. Mix warms with warms or cools with cools to keep color intensity. The neutral zone, otherwise known as the dull zone, and can easily be reached by mixing cool and warm colors together. This can be done both within color families as well as by crossing color families. The most obvious way in which the neutral, i.e. dull zone, can be found is by mixing complementary colors together. This is one of the things we cover in class. I'm sure you have a greater appreciation for the beauty and variety of dull colors that can be achieved on purpose. There is a very good reason for using dull colors...they establish contrast with the brilliant colors in your painting and set the stage for your focal point.

When it comes to the focal point of your painting, contrast is your best friend. Contrast is the key to directing attention in your painting. Our eyes are immediately drawn to contrast. The most striking way to increase contrast in your painting is to place your darkest dark next to your lightest light. Other types of contrast to use include soft focus/sharp focus, bright color/dull color, warm color/ cool color, and busy area/calm

area. Go all out. Use as many of these as you can in one area of your painting, and see what happens to your eye flow.

The more water you use, the more your paint flows. The less water you use, the more you have control. The amount of water you use is entirely up to you. Ninety percent of the time, I paint with my paper upright on my easel, as I did when I painted with oils. I use a moderate amount of water in order to paint on an angle. Painting vertically allows me the opportunity to stand back to watch my progress while I paint. It also gives me an idea of how my piece will look like when it's hanging on the wall. I had the misfortune of learning the hard way that when you draw or paint with your paper flat on a table, you risk distorting your image. This is fine with landscapes and some still lifes, but isn't a good idea when painting a portrait or anything that must closely resemble your subject when complete.

A third relationship you'll develop is with your subject matter, your response to it, and the manner in which you put it onto the paper. How do you decide what you'll paint? What choices and decisions do you make while you paint? What relationships do you create within your painting and with your viewer? How do you direct the viewer to see your intention in a piece? How do you decide what steps to take next while painting? First clarify and distill your subject matter. What is it you want to portray in your painting? What do you want to say, to convey? No matter what you're painting, pick out the part of your subject matter that fascinates you the most and start there. If you're excited about your subject matter, chances are good you'll convey that to your viewer. Keep your excitement alive. Position your subject matter in a way that invites the viewer into your world to feel your joy. Then follow your first instinct, your impulse, and let your imagination take you and your subject matter on a painting excursion. Have fun with your painting.

One of the "rules" I've made for myself in painting is that I only paint when I know what I want to paint. In other words, if I get stuck in a painting, I look at the painting until I see something I can do to improve it. I often internally ask the painting what it needs. I don't just keep painting. There are a few visual tricks I do to change my perspective and help me see what's going on with my piece. Sometimes I'll turn the painting upside down and view it from a distance. Or hold it up in front of myself and look into a mirror. You'll be surprised what you can see when you change your perspective.

Another "rule" I have is that if I don't like what I see happening on the paper, the painting isn't finished; something isn't resolved. If I can't resolve it in my first attempt, I have another opportunity with my next piece. But first I want to be sure I'm ready to move on. Whatever we bring to our paintings (our emotions and thoughts) will always be reflected in our work. Sometimes you simply have to put your painting away and look at it when you're more clear. I've been known to put a painting in my portfolio for 8 months until I knew how to finish it. The timing must be right.

Practice really does help! The first time I realized this I had to laugh at myself for all the times I'd heard this as a kid. It really is true; practice really does help! The more you paint the better you get. Relax. Make friends with your medium, with your subject matter. Learn from every experience you have with paint. Enjoy what you do; it shows.

Draw and paint what you know, what you love, what you see. Or not. Sometimes it's important to explore and learn as you go along. But whatever you draw or paint, know it will be about you. Something in every piece will be a reflection of you and has the ability to teach you something about yourself. Remember the first relationship you're always developing is with yourself.

Learning to paint is learning to see. Don't let your mind tell you what you're seeing, use your eyes! Don't get caught up in the idea that you're painting a person or an apple. You're painting a shape! This might sound really basic, but I can't count the number of times I've sketched my piece and then, in the midst of painting it, realized I'm seeing it differently from the way I drew it. I'm seeing more of it. The more we look, the more is revealed. Sometimes our mind plays tricks on us and we get caught up in thinking we're painting something other than shapes. The more you paint, the more you'll find yourself looking at the world differently. Learning to paint is learning to see.

Create with your heart and follow your flow. Sometimes seeing isn't enough. Unless you want to paint something exactly the way it is, (and then I wonder if a camera wouldn't suffice), learn to see with your heart as well as your eyes.

Create to please yourself first.

No matter what, the most important piece of advice is that you start! It's been said we all have at least 100,000 bad drawings inside us. The sooner we get them out on paper, the sooner we'll get to the good stuff hiding within. Start! And then keep doing it! That last part can be as tricky as the first. No matter how long I've been creating, the fear that I've forgotten how or can't do it again, is lurking in the recesses of my mind. The only cure for this fear is to ignore it completely and begin again.

How to begin? Sometimes that's as tricky as knowing what to do next in the middle of a piece. That's why I recommend you always look to your paper/canvas/medium for a point of beginning. "How will a blank piece of paper?" you ask. I don't know, but I do know that given your focus and attention, it will. The secret is to trust that it will, to stop, look, listen, and then follow the directions you're given, the intuition you feel. Follow your clues, your hunches, and your gut.

Sure, it helps to have something in mind before you get started, but it's not necessary. If you drop all awareness and look deeply at your paper, ideas will come to you. They have to come in answer to your summons. You might be able to dismiss one or two ideas if you don't like them, but take care to follow the next one that pops into your head. Even if you think you might not like where it's taking you, it might be exactly the place you need to go in order to create something that speaks to you. Follow the hunches given you.

This same approach also works when stuck in the middle of a piece. Let me say right now, you do NOT have to know how a piece will be completed before you begin it. You do NOT have to know what the background will look like before you paint your first stroke. A lot of people will tell you that you do, and it's okay if you do know, but don't let your not knowing stop you from starting. It can be wildly exhilarating to put one

stroke in front of the other without knowing your final destination. Sure you might not reach the place you'd hoped on your first try, but you might reach something better. You might find yourself having more fun. And you can always set your sights on a goal the next time you begin again.

Each painting you create is built upon the foundation all your previous paintings have laid down. This happens automatically, whether you're conscious of it or not. So go ahead, get started, start your day knowing it's being built upon the foundation you've already created for yourself. Trust in your process. It's uniquely your own. Whether anyone else sees beauty, awareness, angst, or delight in your outcome, you will be enriched beyond your wildest dreams if you will begin again today and everyday.

“Do not fail to draw something every day, for no matter how little,  
it will do you a world of good.” — Cennino Cennini