

WHAT TO PAINT?

Deciding what to paint can be a problem for the non professional artist especially if you have limited time to spend on your artwork. What you want from painting will also be personal. Even as a part time painter you may have the burning desire to be as meaningful and significant in your work as you can be or maybe you simply see painting as a means of relaxation. Chances are you are somewhere in the middle, you want to do it well but you also want to enjoy it.

Professional artists have the time to develop their own interests, ways of working and what amounts to their own personal line of enquiry. This often describes what an artist does; investigate something in the artistic process that particularly interests them. It is interesting when looking at the biographical works of many twentieth century artists to see how they experiment with a number of the current artistic trends until they find or develop their own way. Finding a way of working that has real substance however takes time and commitment.

So as an occasional artist what do we do?

I think the first and most essential thing is to learn the basics. Understand colour properties, colour mixing and composition in paintings. Practice the art of seeing through drawing and collecting visual information. Learn how to use various media and experiment to find techniques you like. Armed with the tools of the trade you can proceed with more confidence in your decision making and whilst learning you may develop a particular interest. What you choose to paint could evolve from a personal interest in one or more of the basic skills.

Colour - the focus of many artists. There are endless possibilities exploring colour combinations. Look at the notes on choosing colour for more ideas. Your actual subject matter may not be of prime importance and could be anywhere on the scale from realistic towards abstract. Ref. Monet, Cezanne, Gauguin, Bonnard, Whistler, Matisse....

Light - Living in Spain is a good excuse to be excited about the light and its affect on colour. By definition this is probably landscape or situation based. Low sun at the beginning or end of a day often produces the best colours,

especially in winter. Water adds a touch of brilliance which enhances the effect. Remember it is the same sun that lights up an old shed as well as the lady's parasol so cast your net wider than the classic images you have seen before. You can learn much about light by looking at Spain's own Sorolla 'the painter of light'. Also Ref. Monet and the other Impressionists, John Singer Sergant

Composition - You may take to the logic and order of constructing your own images, either organizing a still life or an observed landscape or maybe even inventing your own composition on a sliding scale from real objects to abstract shapes. Interestingly the actual subject matter can become secondary to your focus on the composition.

Ref. Many old masters were superb at manipulating composition, Leonardo Da Vinci, Titian, Vermeer, and more recently Cezanne, Mondrian, Lucian Freud.....

Drawing - There is a freshness and immediacy about drawing which captures energy of what you see before you. Also the act of drawing is often a more personal and direct response to the subject. This power and spontaneity can be translated into paint and other media. It is likely your work will be based on direct observation. For figure work you might start to collect information direct from public places like markets, bars, stations, domestic situations or life drawing classes. For landscape painting, working while sat in front of the actual place has an excitement and sensitized response which can become quite addictive.

Technique - As painters become masters of their own art they start to push the boundaries. 200 years ago Turner experimented endlessly with watercolours and oil painting. He sometimes had 20 paintings on the go trying variations on technique; trying to control natural accidents for his own purposes. There are no rules about technique, only technical guidelines about handling materials. You can experiment by combining any type of paint to see what happens or use different base materials to produce texture. You will almost certainly make a mess but there might be a square inch somewhere that is sheer genius. The trick is doing it twice. In conventional oil painting there are sufficient techniques of glazing, scumbling, impasto, dry brushing and combinations of to keep you happy for years. 'Painterly' is a lovely word that describes work which is very much focused on technique. Ref. Turner, Picasso, Paul Klee.....

Landscape - We are all moved by landscape, either by its peace or its grandeur. When we paint landscape the natural tendency is to be attracted to the picturesque and even today landscape painting is still very much dominated by the images produced two centuries ago by the English Romantic painters. This is safe territory and very much to do with well thought out composition, focal points, the illusion of depth and harmonious colour, not to mention a sweet dash of romanticism. Being focused on what really interests you e.g. Colour, mood... helps you be selective with the tremendous amount of visual information you have to deal with.

To help break the mould of predictability, consider some suggestions.

Look at the landscapes of other cultures; the Chinese and Japanese have a wonderful view of composition based on natural asymmetry and often without the use of the illusion of depth. 100 years ago artists like the Impressionists, Matisse Gauguin and Whistler were very excited by Japanese prints imported at the time.

William Turner is arguably the greatest landscape painter of all time and can still be regarded as a revolutionary. He tried to capture the sensation one feels in the presence of the power of nature. An incredibly difficult thing to do but he did so with more success than any other artist since. Atmosphere and mood are a wonderful focus for work.

Move away from the conventional country cottage and the little bridge over the little stream and try painting the chicken or goat shed! The search for the unusual can be exciting in itself especially with a sketch pad and a digital camera, anything that helps you think and plan.

Still life - is a situation where the artist has total control of the composition, colour and the other elements of picture making. It is studio based with minimal outside interference and without the restrictions of time found with landscape and figure work. The choice of subject is also yours so you can perhaps move away from the traditional collections of domestic items like fruit, flowers and wine bottles and be more adventurous or unconventional with your choice of subject matter.

Buildings - Have great potential because of their three dimensional aspect and structure. As part of landscape they can provide focus, structure and

contrast. As a study in themselves they require a knowledge of perspective but can be a great subject. Composition is an important element because of the lines and shapes involved but you can experiment with the other elements of colour, tone and texture.

Figures and portraits - A subject with tremendous potential. Not only do you have the figure to draw with all the complexities of shape and suggestions of movement but also you have the human element and the psychological implications. Portraits have the added buzz of chasing that likeness. Ref. Rembrant, Egon Sheile, Lucian Feud and many more....