

## **Painting for People Who Can't Draw , by Aisling D'Art**

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### **DRAWING**

Too often, when people approach drawing, they're trying to mimic a camera. If you want a perfect linear reproduction of what's in front of you, *use a camera*. That's the only way that you'll be happy.

But, if you want to draw, and create a wonderful, personal visual journal or sketch, keep in mind that you are *interpreting* the scene, not attempting to create a photograph with your pencil or pen.

There are several ways to learn to sketch. Two of the best for beginners are gesture drawings and contour drawings.

#### **Contour drawing**

A contour drawing is the outline... It is the edge of what you're looking at, either the edge of the object or the edge of the space created by the object/s. In a portrait, when you draw a smile, you're usually drawing the space created by the open mouth. You'll rarely draw the outline of the outside edges of the lips first; you'll add the lips and the teeth later, if at all.

When you're learning to draw the contours, it's best to try not to pick the point of the pen or pencil up from the paper.

That is, like peeling an apple and trying to get the entire peel in one, unbroken strip, you're trying to draw everything that represents the object or scene, without lifting the pencil.

It won't come out well at first. In fact, it may never look "right" to you. But, it's a good challenge when you're learning, because you have *no hope* of it looking like a photograph. Freed of that impossible standard, you'll be more relaxed and learn to really *look* at whatever you're drawing.

With practice, you'll get a better sense of when it's good to lift the pen or pencil, and when not to. But, when you're starting out, keep the point of the pen on the paper, always.

After you've tried drawing a few times, without lifting the pen or pencil, it's time to loosen up some more. For this, we use a timer. Start out by trying to capture the object or scene in front of you within two minutes. Then, within one minute. Then, within 30 seconds. Just once, try this with just a ten-second series of lines.

Whatever you captured in those ten seconds is probably all that you'd need in the finished drawing, to convey the important parts of what's in front of you. And, that's what you should focus on, with your more "finished" art.

Having practiced with these limitations, it's time to go back and draw the same subject again, but this time with no time constraints, and you can lift your pen or pencil from the paper.

Try three or four contour drawings, each done quickly but comfortably, until you feel that you've got the idea of how contour drawing works.

Now, it's just a matter of practice to get "good" at this technique. If you make a point of doing one quick contour drawing daily, even a 30-second sketch on a paper towel or the back of an envelope, you'll make remarkable progress.

And, we never erase when doing contour drawing.

### **Sketching with gestures**

Gesture sketching or drawing is exactly that: Using broad gestures with your pen or pencil (usually a pencil) to *suggest* the object or scene in front of you. We very rarely use an eraser in this kind of study.

Again, we are avoiding any effort to mimic a camera. What you're capturing with a gesture drawing is the sense of movement of the lines in a scene.

You'll use lots of light lines, repeating similar motions with the pencil, over a particular area. With each successive stroke of the pencil, you'll refine how the image looks.

You'll start with a few lines and say, for example, "Okay, the apple is sort of a ball shape, like this... [sketch, sketch]... but, it's actually got more of a bulge over on this side... [sketch, sketch]... and then the base of it is pretty straight on this side... [sketch, sketch]... then there's the stem that's sort of a short line... [sketch, sketch]... but, no, it actually kind of curves this way... [sketch, sketch]..." And so on.

And then, when it looks pretty much how you'd like it to look, and clearly *suggests* what's in front of you, you are finished. Do not go adding teensy details. Don't try to add light or shade, either.

*Important:* Neither contour nor gesture drawing lend themselves well to adding light/shade after the sketch is completed.

### **If you want light & dark areas**

The time to add light and dark to a pencil sketch is before you actually start your line work. Really. It's best to rough-in the dark areas (and lift out the highlights with a kneaded rubber eraser) first. If you're working in pencil, use a very soft pencil if you can... a 4B or even a 6B.

Then, smudge the shadows with your finger or a smudge stick. (A smudge stick, also called a "stump," is usually a tightly-wrapped paper stick that looks like a pencil. It's basic function is to smudge your pencil or charcoal the same as you'd use the sponge applicator in your eyeshadow to soften any harsh edges of color.)

After you've suggested where the lights & shadows are, *then* start doing the line drawing on top of that. (This is a lot like our approach to painting with oils or acrylics: Work in the larger areas first, then add the details.)

### **Other approaches to drawing and sketching**

When my mother went to art college, they taught her to base all of her drawings on geometric shapes. The tree looks like a cylinder. The apple looks like a sphere or a ball. Michael Douglas' chin looks like two joined rectangles. And so on.

It was a disastrous approach. Even today, my mother has to work hard to break the habit of reducing objects to simple, featureless shapes. It's sort of like learning to type while looking at the keys; the temptation to keep doing that stays with you, even when you know that it's slowing you down.

Likewise, the *careful measuring* approach to drawing isn't good for travel journaling, etc. That involves measuring everything "just so" and getting it on paper with precise proportions. This may involve one-, two- or even three-point perspective and other drafting techniques.

When you do a sketch "by the numbers," you lose sight of what's important. Everything seems of equal importance, and again, it's trying to make your pencil

capture the scene as if you're a camera. Don't do it. Choose a few elements in the scene that are important, that really distinguish it, and put those on paper. Just suggest everything else, if you even bother with it.

## **Preparing your sketch for color**

If you want to add color to your sketches, watercolor is good for this. So is colored pencil. Or, acrylic paints used as watercolors. Or crayons, pastels, oil pastels, and so on.

If you're going to work with watercolor, you'll need to make certain that your sketch won't run when it gets wet. If you used a water-soluble pen, you're pretty much out of luck. If you used pencil, there will be some loss from the lines, but if you planned ahead for this (you'll learn, with practice), it's okay.

In the studio, you can use a spray fixative (available at art supply stores) to "fix" the pencil or other medium. But, it will not make a water-based ink waterproof.

Fixative comes in two forms: regular, and workable. Workable fixative simply means that you can keep working on your sketch, erasing it and so on. This is what I usually use, in case I realize that I want to change something. But, you can often do the same kind of changes if you've used regular fixative. It varies with brand, medium, paper, and so on.

Use the fixative in a well-ventilated area. The fumes from it can be like working with airplane glue.

## **Using watercolor as a coloring agent**

There are two ways to approach watercolor for this kind of illustration: You can apply it to a dry page or a wet one.

When you're starting out, I generally recommend getting the page wet first, and "floating" the color onto the general areas where you'd like it. It'll run all over the place. It's supposed to. This is *art*.

When the page dries, you can add details (with watercolor, colored pencil, etc) or just leave it as it is.

When floating color on, remember that the color will seem to fade as it dries. So, work with color more vivid than you think you need.

If you want really bright and intense colors, try Dr. pH Martin's dye-based colors. They're liquid, and you may want to dilute them with water before using them.

If you're using cake watercolors (solid, the kind you used in grade school, as opposed to tubes of paint), put a little water on each cake that you'll use, to start softening the paint. It'll flow much better when you scoop it up with your brush.

If you make a mistake when you're floating color onto wet paper, you can simply wash the paper off and most (or all) of the color will wash off as well.

If you make a mistake painting with watercolor on dry paper... you'll need to get creative. It's rarely a good idea to try to cover the mistake with white paint and re-paint it. The white paint never absorbs color the same as surrounding areas of the paper.

Likewise, if you try to lift or scratch the mistake off with a razor or X-Acto blade, the surface of the paper will be different from the area around it. Generally, any area that you've treated with an abrasive (blade or even an eraser) will absorb pigment more readily, leaving your painted surface blotchy.

Generally, it's best to find a way to work *with* the mistake, and paint over it or change the composition of your work to incorporate it so that it looks as if you did it on purpose.

If you use white paint at all, it's best to use it after your other colors have dried. Use it carefully and selectively, to highlight only a few spots that catch the light in a scene.

And, here's a trick that my mother learned in art school: To keep the eye moving around the picture, add a tiny dot of cadmium red somewhere. Where? You'll get a sense for where it should go... this is one of those instinct things, and I can't explain how to do it. Generally, it goes in an area that is otherwise undistinguished... an area that has no energy of its own, such as random foliage or a very flat side of a building.

## **ABOUT WATERCOLOR**

John F. Carlson said it well, "Do *not* for at least the first year of your study, attempt to work in *water color*, or any other medium, but rather get your experience or knowledge in oil color." And, "The transparency of water color allows no radical changes of

color or composition in the picture.” (page 17, Carlson’s Guide to Landscape Painting)

In other words, if you’re painting with oils or acrylics, you can paint over a mistake and nobody has to know that it ever happened. With watercolors, it’s far more difficult to conceal a mistake, or even a change of plan/composition after you’ve started painting.

That said, for art journaling, watercolor can be a fine way to lend color to your basic sketches or drawings. Just don’t try to make watercolor into some way to make your sketch approach the appearance of a photograph.

If you want to learn watercolor as an art form, that’s fine. It takes weeks of basic study just to get started. And then, it takes practice... lots of practice. And, classes with people who are inspired and really know how to teach watercolor.

In my experience, disappointment with watercolors is the single most often-heard reason why people give up on drawing and painting altogether. And, it’s usually because they tried to create something too perfect, too soon.

Learn to paint with oils or acrylics, first. The principles of color are the same, and it’s far less depressing to see a disaster-in-progress with acrylics or oils, because you can paint over it, salvaging what you did *right* in the painting. With a watercolor, you often have to throw the entire piece out.

## **Painting for People Who Can't Draw**

### **PAINTING NOTES - ACRYLICS AND OILS**

#### **Choosing your colors**

With “crayon box” colors--basic red, yellow and blue--you can mix any color that you need for painting landscapes. That is, any color that Nature creates can be made with red, yellow and blue, plus white to lighten the pigment.

However, many artists prefer to use a wider range of colors on their palette. This varies from artist to artist. Some suggest a warm yellow and a cool yellow, a warm blue and a cool one, and the same with red.

I lean towards having a medium blue (Cobalt) and a teal blue (Phthalo), because I paint a lot of skies. And, I like a good range of reds, oranges, and greens. I rarely use a cool navy blue, but that's my personal preference. I also use only one yellow, and it's translucent, because I'll usually mix yellow with another color.

Speaking of that, paints come in two varieties: Opaque and translucent. You can “see through” the translucent ones, so you can use them as a glaze over other colors, and they'll mix better with other paints, both opaque and translucent.

You can make any translucent paint opaque by mixing it with white paint. Even a small amount of white paint can be enough for this purpose.

When working with white paint... White occurs in nature, but it's rarely the white that comes out of the tube. (Titanium White mixes better than other whites, by the way.) You will almost always mix white with another color. White generally reflects the colors around it. However, to make it leap out more, consider the colors next to it in your finished picture, and add just a little of the opposite color (on the color wheel) to make it “glow.”

Black is never natural in nature. Unless you're painting a man-made object, never use black. Instead, mix opposite colors on the color wheel to get a good dark brown, and tweak the exact shade by adding one other color to warm it up or cool it down.

#### **Light and shadow**

For a shadow, never use black. Traditional rules claim that the shadow is a balance of the color of the object, the color opposite that on the color wheel, plus the color of

whatever-it-is that the shadow falls upon. So, if the shadow is of a brown-trunked tree and the shadow is cast on the grass, the shadow's color should be a mix of brown, plus its color opposite (blue), and green.

What you see in light--natural sunlight, that is--is composed of two colors: Local color (that is, the actual pigment in the object) and perceived (or radiant) color. Perceived or radiant color is what the Impressionists painted. I always try to underpaint with the perceived color, and then add local color only enough so that the viewer understands the subject that I was painting.

### **Underpainting, on canvas**

But, beneath all of my paintings, you will usually find a layer of Cadmium Red. I get the most vivid shade in any line. In Golden, that's Pyrrole Red. In Brera, it's Cadmium Red Medium, which I might mix with Cadmium Orange. The idea is to get a good, rich, vivid fire engine red, and cover your canvas with a thin coating of this. Even if the entire canvas is concealed with additional layers of paint, this often makes every color seem to glow. Try it and see if it works for you.

On top of this red, I paint in bold, broad areas of perceived/radiant color. The final step is to add local color.

### **Sunlight and shade, and notes on landscape painting (especially trees)**

Paint with your canvas and palette in the shade. As John F. Carlson said in his important book, "Carlson's Guide to Landscape Painting,"

If working in very strong light, never be without your umbrella over your work. Sketches painted in the sunlight always prove a disappointment when brought into the sober light of the studio. Out-of-doors, they may seem to be sparkling with color; indoors the colors look cold and drab. (page 20, 1973 Dover Publications reprint)

More advice from Carlson's book:

Get the canvas "going" all over as soon as possible, after you have thoroughly thought out your composition. A good picture is a series of good corrections, a striking of balance, so do not expect too much from the mere "lay-in." (page 32)

It is a curious fact that the value of a clear blue sky is *darker* than that of a filmy or overcast sky (except where very densely overcast as in the case of a stormy sky). (page 36)

Beware of the darks within dark masses, such as the inside shadow of trees. The general tendency is to make them too black. (page 39)

There probably never was a picture that was poor because it lacked detail or subject-matter; rather, the opposite. Bad paintings are usually so overloaded with useless detail that the essentials are obliterated. (page 41)

The light predominates at the expense of color. The eye cannot see distinctions when looking into the light. The blue of the sky when approaching the sun becomes a mere colorless glare, while the sky opposite the sun can be viewed with ease, and is blue. (page 56)

(about the “holes” between leaves or masses of leaves, in trees) Logically enough, the smaller the “hole,” the less quantity of light admitted; therefore, the smaller the hole, the darker or grayer it is in value. The lightest holes through our trees are, then, the largest holes. (page 57)

All things become cooler and lighter in value as they recede into the distance... near objects therefore are more sharply defined in outline and richer and darker in color and value. (page 64)

The darkening of the sky a few degrees before it reaches the horizon or ground is one of the most important of all gradations. (page 65)

The average tree trunk, compared with the mass of the tree’s leaves or branches above the first low branch, is usually no larger than the stem of an apple, compared with the apple... Every tree has a distinct apex, or high point, and it is toward this apex that your main trunk meanders or reaches. (page 98)

... bare branches are arranged by nature into large groups of branches within the tree, rather than a harum-scarum network... Every tree, therefore, besides having three or four or five important *carrying branches*, also has, of necessity, four or five important “sky holes” or dividing spaces.

...all the branches that come toward you are darker than those going away from you.

... some trees appear to dance, others to reach, others to curtsy, others to sulk, others to stand at attention. (page 104)

(About clouds) ... the whitest or lightest tones are never near the edge, except when the cloud is interposed between you and the sun, when it shows its "silver lining."

## **How to get depth to objects, and to the landscape**

Remember that three-dimensional objects have three or more values in them, always. There is the side nearest the light, the side most in the shade, and the in-between area/s. So, to make any object look more three-dimensional, always be sure that it has at least three values (light to dark) in it.

Things closest to you have many important qualities: They are more in focus. They have richer color. Their colors are warmer in appearance. They are darker.

So, if you need to make something look as if it's further away from you, make it more "grey." This means to use more of the color opposite it on the color wheel, as you mix your colors. If it's a green, add a bit of red. If it's yellow, add a touch of violet. And so on.

You can also use white to "cool down" any color. This is especially useful with objects that are a vivid yellow, but need to look more distant without losing the integrity of their yellow-ness.

Likewise, to keep the foreground at the front, make it warmer, darker, richer in color, and add notes of detail to the objects.

Exaggerate everything. It's like increasing saturation on any photo that you're going to put online. With painting, you need to break through that emotional distance that people have.

Remember, when people look at your paintings, they're bringing a lot of their own luggage with them: Above all, they're afraid to look closely in case they don't like the painting and hurt your feelings. They don't know if they know enough to be art critics. They don't know much art history, so they don't have a context to drop your work into. They weren't there when you were painting, to compare the subject to the finished work, so they don't know if their estimation of the painting's worth is valid or completely off-base. They don't want to seem stupid, whether they say that they like the painting or if they don't. And, they are afraid that it's all a matter of taste, and

if they say something different from what someone else has said or will say, they'll be laughed at or criticized for lacking taste or something.

It all adds up to a rather massive wall of distance that they put between themselves and your art. So, by intensifying the color and beauty of what you see, as you put it on canvas exaggerate it. It's like shouting down a long tunnel, trying to reach people with art sometimes.

Go look at the paintings that evoke the strongest approval... Monet, Homer, Renoir, Rembrandt, Vermeer, and Maxfield Parrish. See how vividly they used color, contrast, and texture. That's what you're aiming for with your work. And, the way that you exaggerate is what determines your personal "style," so never copy others. Be an original... and make sure to create art that reaches across that abyss to your viewers. Lots of color. Lots of contrast. Lots of positive energy. Lots of whatever it is that seems most vivid in the subject in front of you, whether it's a still life, a portrait, or a landscape.

### **When to stop painting**

Remember to stop painting when you first think, "Gee, this looks pretty good." As soon as you start thinking, "It'll be finished when I add just this one thing... and then that one thing... and then this little thingie over here..." *STOP*.

### **What to do if it looks awful and keeps getting worse**

If your painting looks perfectly awful at any point, take a break and do nothing. If you can't figure out what's wrong with it when you get back, remember this important rule:

What you think is wrong, probably isn't the biggest single problem. What you think is wrong is where you've probably overworked it. Look elsewhere for what's really bothering you about the painting.

If that still doesn't help, take your canvas and turn it upside down. Look at it that way. Usually, you'll see what isn't working.

If you still don't see anything that would fix the problem quickly, go take a longer break, away from the painting. If necessary, work on something else. But usually, it's a case of doing no painting at all for awhile, and returning when your viewpoint is fully refreshed.

Look at the painting and say to yourself, “What is the one, single, simple thing that I could change, that would improve the entire painting?”

If none of these things help, wait at least a week and try again. If it’s still a disaster, paint over the canvas and try again. That’s one of the great things about acrylics and oils: You can fully cover your disappointments!

### **It’s like gambling: Always quit while you’re ahead**

Remember what Carlson said about detail: “There probably never was a picture that was poor because it lacked detail or subject-matter; rather, the opposite. Bad paintings are usually so overloaded with useless detail that the essentials are obliterated.” (page 41)

Look at Monet’s work up close. Or Cicerly’s. Or any Pointillist work. Or even a Renoir.

Up close, they lack detail. Heck, some of Monet’s paintings... you can’t even tell what the subject was until you’re at least ten feet away from the canvas!

Painting involves walking far away from your work regularly. Every 20 - 30 minutes at least. Look at your work from at least 20 feet away. See what’s working and what isn’t.

When you look at it and say, “Gee, that’s pretty good,” it’s time to stop. Take out a new canvas and paint something else if you must, but it’s best to call it a day and do something else altogether.