

HOW TO FIND INSPIRATION

PAINTING DAILY AND KEEPING THE CREATIVE SPARK ALIVE

BY ERIN HANSON

VISITORS to my studio often ask how I stay inspired or if I ever run out of ideas to paint. My answer is to point to a 2-foot-tall stack of photos and say, “These are the paintings I wish I could start right now!”

In other words, no, I never run out of things to paint. I thought you’d find it interesting to hear about how I keep myself inspired.

One of my primary methods for staying inspired is keeping a long list of painting subjects that I love to paint, such as still life sunflowers, paths through the trees, wine country scenes, sunset skies, wildflowers, Japanese maple trees, fruit trees in bloom, crystal light shadows, etc.

If I ever feel uncertain of what to paint next, I flip through my giant pile of reference photos, or I look down my handy list of painting subjects. For me, every new painting is an opportunity to think of a fresh way to capture a familiar scene—like painting a grove of maple trees on a bright green underpainting to illuminate the warm colors of autumn.

Another way I stay motivated is by having a show or exhibition to paint for. For example, I have an annual *Petite Show*, and I use this time to create all the miniature paintings I’ve wanted to paint all year. This focus helps me maintain motivation



“DON’T THINK ABOUT MAKING ART, JUST GET IT DONE. LET EVERYONE ELSE DECIDE IF IT’S GOOD OR BAD, WHETHER THEY LOVE IT OR HATE IT. WHILE THEY ARE DECIDING, MAKE EVEN MORE ART.” —ANDY WARHOL

because I already know the theme I’m working on for the week.

As another example, this year I had a museum show in St. George that centered on the national parks in southern Utah. This gave me an excuse to visit Zion National Park, Cedar Breaks, and Bryce Canyon again. After these photo safaris, I had about a hundred paintings I wanted to paint when I returned home, and I had new ideas like capturing cottonwood trees against red rock cliffs and reflections of light in the Virgin River. The hardest part was narrowing down my ideas to only a few dozen that would fit in the show. But I like giving myself a stiff challenge—this helps me stay inspired.

Speaking of challenges, one of the most stimulating exhibitions I ever painted was my *Orange Show* in 2016. This collection of 18 paintings focused entirely on the color orange, pushing me to figure out how to create landscapes using various hues of the same color. The process kept me on my toes and forced me to see nature differently.

If I really feel stumped and I am not sure what to paint next, my best solution is to go outside and take a walk. There is something revitalizing about surrounding myself with open skies and nature that gets me excited about painting. I love to look at trees in particular—I never get tired of painting their interesting shapes and negative spaces.

Every time I return home from a photo safari (my most recent trip



was exploring southern France), I go through the reference photos I took, and I print out the top few that I’m eager to paint first. And I add them to the 2-foot-tall stack in my studio. There is enough inspiration in that stack for a lifetime of painting!

To bring up a related topic, I know from my own experience and from other artists that it can be discouraging when paintings don’t find homes quickly. Nothing is more motivating to an artist than having a sellout show, but having artwork stack up in boxes or gather dust is disheartening. To me,

a painting isn’t truly complete until it is hanging on someone’s wall, brightening their home and lifting their spirits. This is the reason I paint—to bring people joy—and until this goal is achieved, I don’t have that sense of morale from a job well done. This is why I have continued the tradition of my annual Holiday Extravaganza.

The Extravaganza started out as a solution to a problem I ran into when moving my studio and gallery from San Diego to McMinnville in 2020. I had over 100 original paintings in inventory, and we would have had to



(THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE) Erin gathering inspiration for painting by connecting directly with the outdoors.

“If you hear a voice within you say ‘you cannot paint,’ then by all means paint and that voice will be silenced.” – Vincent van Gogh

rent a second semi-truck to relocate them. I decided I would rather my paintings find loving homes at any price than move them to Oregon. We sent out a promotional email saying that we would accept any and all reasonable offers on original paintings, and we sold 80 paintings in 7 days. The feedback from our collectors was tremendous, and many were able to acquire originals that had been out of reach before.

The morale this created for me as an artist, knowing that my paintings were being valued and loved, and the joy I felt making so many people happy, kept me inspired at the easel for months. I have been putting on Holiday Extravanzas ever since, taking the last few weeks of the year to “clear out” my original painting inventory, allowing me to start fresh in the new year.

Another practice that’s really helped me stay inspired is limiting my screen time. I’ve noticed that spending too much time looking at TV, news or social media will sap my creative energy. Taking breaks from screens seems to clear the mind and make room for new ideas.

A final barrier to staying inspired is the frustration many artists feel when their paintings don’t turn out the way they envisioned. I experienced this many times when I was first learning how to paint in oils. My solution was to commit to finishing one painting a week, no matter what. I was able to work through my trouble areas with trial and error, and my confidence as an artist improved. The discipline of painting every week, whether I thought the finished piece was good or not, turned me into a professional artist. I like Pablo Picasso’s words of

wisdom: “Inspiration exists, but it has to find you working.”

If you are ever not sure what to paint, go outside and take in the world around you. Don’t rely on screens for inspiration. Paint directly from the source of inspiration, which is Life, Nature, Color, and Light.

In the end, I have found that it is up to me to create inspiration, repeatedly, dependably, on a daily basis. It’s a practice in itself, and something that anyone can get better at with time.





“You can’t wait
for inspiration. You have to
go after it with a club.”

– Jack London