

IMPRESSIONIST TECHNIQUES

ASPIRING PAINTERS SHOULD KNOW

How to use planning techniques to paint loosely and confidently

BY ERIN HANSON

AS A CONTEMPORARY IMPRESSIONIST PAINTER, one of my goals is to carry forward the traditions of the French Impressionists into the modern day. Over the years, I've developed techniques that keep my colors fresh and free me to focus on atmospheric light and the textural movement of the landscape—the same qualities that inspired those impressionists.

My work has been described as abstracted, expressionistic, post-Impressionistic, “a blend of Monet and van Gogh” — however it's labeled, the core techniques behind my paintings haven't changed in twenty years. They form the foundation of what I call **Open Impressionism**.

What follows are the techniques I use every day in my studio. I hope they're helpful to aspiring artists reading this.

PLAN, PLAN, PLAN

To be loose and painterly with expressive brushwork, I plan and predict almost to the level of each individual brushstroke what I am going to paint, before I paint it. With all the analytical decisions out of the way, this gives me the confidence to be passionate and loose when I am painting.

USE AN UNDERPAINTING

I use a tinted underpainting for every painting I create. This allows me to leave small spaces between brushstrokes, like grout in a mosaic—which ties the entire painting together.

Over the years, I've experimented extensively with underpaintings. These are the most important tricks I've learned:

1. Student-grade paints, such as Winton, contain less pigment than artist-grade paints, which results in a more transparent wash. I've found that laying down a transparent wash instead of an opaque one enhances a painting's luminosity.
2. I use Liquin when laying down my underpainting. This creates a smooth surface to paint on. It also dries overnight.
3. My choice of underpainting color has a big impact on the finished work. If I contrast my top colors, it creates a feeling of tension or excitement. Complementing those colors will instead create a feeling of mellow calmness.



Erin Hanson in her studio

WIPE YOUR BRUSH

I wipe my brush between almost every brushstroke. This keeps my paint colors clean and separated. I personally like to use Viva paper towels.

PREMIX YOUR COLORS

You have probably heard me talk about using a limited palette. Whether you use five colors on your palette or fifteen, I have found it facilitates the creative process to mix out on the palette every color hue and value that will appear in the painting, before ever picking up a brush.

DON'T FIX YOUR PAINTING

I resist the urge to fix my painting while I'm in the middle of it. Attempting to correct areas as you go often leads to muddy color, overworked surfaces, and lost energy. The best mantra I've adopted while painting is: "Don't overlap my brushstrokes." This forces me to commit and get it right the first time.

If I feel like I've missed my mark with a painting, I've learned it's far more successful to finish it as is and try a different approach in the next painting—rather than attempting to fix the oil paint already on the canvas. Developing the habit of fixing while painting trains you to become a professional fixer, when instead you should be developing the habit of painting decisively from the start. It's those first, uncorrected brushstrokes that keeps a painting fresh, alive, and truly painterly.

HAVE A PURPOSE

I always have a purpose behind every painting I create. My unique vision of the world is what makes my paintings one of a kind. When I look at a reference photo I took out in the field, I carefully select the exact parts of the landscape that I will focus on in my composition. Having a purpose when I paint might be something as simple as "I will make the sky yellow, so that the purple shadows pop." Then every decision I make while painting must align with that purpose. I would not suddenly paint a blue shadow (even if the shadow looked blue in my photograph) or decide to put streaks of green in my sky. The compositional purpose rules all.

SKETCH, SKETCH, SKETCH

The best advice I ever got on painting technique was from Edgar Payne in *Composition of Outdoor Painting*. Payne states, "Even where a natural composition is seen, it should be subjected to many variations in pencil notes. From several pencil plans, the painter may choose the most likely one. It stands to reason that a selection from several ideas will yield a better plan than if a hurried start is made on the canvas with only one idea considered."



Therefore, I sketch several compositions with pencil and paper before I begin the rest of my painting planning. These pencil sketches let me visualize and clarify my composition and purpose while I begin the process of eliminating what is not important from the scene and focusing on the few simplicities that will lead to a powerful composition.

The struggle of making a good painting should not be seen in the final piece. Let the struggle come out in the preparatory sketches, the color mixing, the small practice paintings you do first, the hours of thinking and toiling over what you want the finished painting to be. Just like a dancer, the audience wants to see the effortless beauty of the pirouette, not the sweat and toil of daily practice and worn-out toes.

I wish you happy planning that will lead to successful painting.

