



DO YOU WANT TO START PAINTING?

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The visual arts take many forms these days, not just 2D pictures on a wall. There is sculpture, ceramics, light shows, films, installations and performance but for the amateur wishing to embark on creating some art, it is perhaps painting and drawing that they have in mind. This can be a totally absorbing hobby and is a marvellous thing to do when stuck at home due to Corona virus or winter weather, but, if you are part of an art class, it can also lead to many friendships.

The easiest and cheapest way to start is with drawing. All you need is a few pencils of different [hardnesses](#), a rubber and some cartridge paper. Draw something every day! How about your coffee mug, an apple or a bunch of keys, if feeling adventurous? You could also use charcoal as well.

Many amateur painters choose watercolours. Watercolour has a wonderful luminous quality and can lead to many happy accidents as the results can be unpredictable. It is wonderful for skies and landscapes and can be surprisingly effective for portraits. Because it is a transparent medium, the white of the paper has to be preserved as the lightest parts of the painting, with subsequent layers applied to darker parts. This may mean you have to do “negative painting” around light parts. For instance, if painting white flowers on a dark background, you need to leave the white of the petals untouched and just paint the background.

Watercolours are quick drying and easy to carry around, tend to be small and relatively inexpensive. It is however, quite a difficult medium as you have to have lots of practice in controlling the amount of water used. People think that you cannot correct any mistakes, but if you have some thick strong paper, it is quite easy to scrub out. Thick paper also avoids the need to stretch your paper. If you just have thin paper it has to be wetted and stuck down firmly to a board and allowed to tighten up when dry, so that it will not buckle when painted. Tube paints are recommended rather than pans of dry paint as you will get much stronger colours. You don't need many colours to start with. A suggested “desert island” selection would be: ultramarine blue, cobalt blue, burnt sienna, cadmium red, cadmium yellow, lemon yellow. From these you can make most colours including black. You need special watercolour brushes: a big thick one for washes, a medium size one and a fine one for details.

Another interesting medium is acrylic paint. You can use them thinned down like watercolours or slapped on neat like oils. You can get all sorts of additives to add textures or to help them spread easily. They tend to be very bright, although obviously you can mix any colour you want. This is great if you want to do big, bold paintings on canvas. You can also get acrylic paper. Acrylics dry very quickly, which can be an advantage, but can also be a disadvantage. There are special stay-wet palettes which enable you to keep your paints workable for several days. There are also some kinds of acrylic paints that can be re-wetted with a spray of water.

Unlike watercolour, acrylic paintings start from dark to light, so if you are painting something shiny, for example, you just put the highlights on at the end. You can also paint over any mistakes! To the “desert island” selection of colours you will also need lots of white.

There are also acrylic inks. These are quite transparent and can be built up in interesting layers. They can be used as an underpainting for watercolours.

Oil paints are the most traditional medium, needing to be mixed with oil or thinned with turps, although you can now get water-mixable oils which avoid the smell. You can get subtle blending effects or heavy impasto. You need to have more patience with oils as you need to let each layer dry over several days or otherwise you can end up with a muddy mess. They are also difficult to carry around, although painters who specialise in painting out of doors devise special boxes, where the canvas or board is suspended by its edges to stop it getting smudged. Oils normally come in tubes, although you can also get oil sticks. You paint from dark to light as with acrylics and also from thick to thin, i.e. start with a thin base coat and gradually build up thicker layers.

Then there are pastels. These come as soft or hard pastels. You need special paper for these, with a “tooth” to grip the powder and you usually finish the painting with a fixer so that the painting does not get smudged. The paper is often coloured, which makes for less effort trying to cover up white paper. You need quite a good selection of colours and this can be quite expensive. Professional artists who use pastels tend to have hundreds of colours but you can mix on the paper by cross-hatching with different pastels. Here you can paint from dark to light or light to dark, whatever you fancy, although there is a limit to the number of layers you can put on as the tooth of paper becomes filled up. Pastels can also be rather messy as you get it all over your hands when blending in and the dust falls off but they can have lovely effects.

You can often combine some of these mediums: e.g. you can use acrylic as an underpainting for oils, pastels on top of watercolour, or collage of paper with anything. To get your materials try either Range or Hobby Craft but a much wider selection is available online – try ‘GreatArt’ , ‘Ken Bromley’ or ‘Jacksons’. There are hundreds of books available. These tend to focus on one medium.

I would recommend you to get a tutor if possible. Our U3A has a painting group called Hands on Art and we meet twice a month in North Ferriby Guide hut, but we do not have a tutor - at the moment we are limited to 6 because of Covid-19 restrictions. There is also an outdoor sketching group which runs in the summer months.

Don’t worry if your first efforts don’t turn out well. With practice, you will learn to see what’s there rather than what you think is there and be able to assess depths of tone and light. Do try this fascinating hobby.