

Preface

It is the aim of this book to provide you a comprehensive understanding of what you need to know that you may undertake painting with genuine passion and commitment. Written in English, as I am an English-speaking American, this guide primarily targets Western audiences, including both Europeans and Americans, who are eager to learn the art of painting. Nevertheless, it is for everyone.

But one cannot discuss all aspects of painting without delving into the broader subject of art. In and of itself, painting is not an art, but it can be. It can be undertaken without the result, or even the intention, being artistic. It can be a hobby or a craft, but in its most noble form, the act of painting should be to strive to make art. Therefore, this issue, “what is art?” is at the very heart of this book. The answer is illusive and for many it is

ever-changing by evolving in form, but the intrinsic nature of art is eternal. Lines, color, shapes, and content are all superficial elements of a painting. Art cannot be defined by any analysis of the artist's skill in using these elements. They do not define art but rather, identify it. They are the trace evidence of that which reflects and advances a culture.

Realizing this is to realize that painting transcends the mere act of applying pigment to a surface. It is a thoughtful practice that requires mindfulness and awareness. An intellectual pursuit unlike spoken and written words, painting is a universal language easily understood beyond the confines of geographic borders and diverse cultures, yet embraces personalized meaning for both artist and viewer.

We each inhabit our own cultural context, which profoundly shapes our appreciation and understanding of art—particularly painting. For most of us, unless fortunate enough to have traveled extensively, our exposure to notable artworks comes primarily from books. However, in larger cities boasting significant museums, anyone with access can view an impressive array of original works spanning various genres, often at no cost. In the United States, major urban centers like Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles lead the way, but virtually any significant city features museums where visitors can be profoundly inspired by the paintings on display. In Europe paintings proliferate in museums, cathedrals, palaces and estates and virtually every country boasts an extraordinary claim for its contributions to exhibiting paintings from its rich history.

Art is a universal language that resonates with

every culture, yet the narrative of art history, as taught in academic institutions, predominantly focuses on European art and the sequence of art movements that have led to today. The iconic paintings that have come to define major artistic movements are primarily housed in European museums thus creating an inherent bias that overlooks the contributions of cultures that historically created their art outdoors—on cliffs, in caves, or on the exterior of teepees. While these forms of artistic expression may be less accessible, they are incredibly influential and must be recognized in the ongoing dialogue surrounding the evolution and symbiotic nature of art.

Similarly, the artistic traditions of Asia offer a much different painting style, it being more two-dimensional and lacking traditional perspective, a flattened appearance that differs significantly from the arc of Western painters. The impact of Asian

art can be evidenced in various movements, such as Art Nouveau, and continues to resonate in the works of artists like Aubrey Beardsley and in the realm of graphic design, particularly through the innovative designs of figures like the Pre-Raphaelite William Morris. Understanding these diverse influences is essential for a well-rounded perspective on the art of painting.

Forward

This book is not a reflection of my personal story, but rather the insights and knowledge I have acquired regarding the art of painting. I present it in the interest of advancing the form for others, but to provide meaningful context and enhance your understanding., I am offering some personal background about how I came to understand the art of painting. In this way, you may better evaluate the perspective from which I speak.

Frankly, I never imagined that someday I might become a professional artist, much less a painter. Born in 1949, the son of a military officer who returned from World War II to complete his college education, I observed my father's career trajectory and came to understand that growing up meant securing a paying job. Instilled with the belief that

the most respected and financially rewarding careers could only be achieved through a college education in fields like architecture, law, engineering, or medicine—none of which piqued my interest—I felt a strong sense of family pressure to follow a conventional path. You cannot set out to do that which you do not know exists. Because my limited experience closely observing adults was confined to my parents and what they told me they knew, my thoughts regarding the attainment of adulthood never exceeded their imposed limitations and limited vision of the world as they knew it to be.

My early education took place in private Catholic schools, culminating in a three-year tenure at an all-boys Catholic military high school in San Antonio. This was followed by my father's transfer to an Air Force base in Anchorage, Alaska, where, due to the absence of Catholic high schools, I

completed my education in a public institution. I graduated in 1965, having just turned sixteen.

Prior to moving, my education had focused on rigorous college preparatory courses, including courses in Latin, chemistry, and trigonometry. Transitioning to a public school for my senior year was a welcome contrast, filled with an array of electives such as beginning band, art, speech, and mechanical drawing. Yet, the most captivating aspect of this new environment was the presence of girls.

At sixteen, I recognized that I was not yet socially mature enough to embark on a college journey. Having recently joined a rock band as their drummer, my world revolved around music and the exciting social life that accompanied it. Thoughts of pursuing academia felt distant; what truly mattered to me was the joy of playing drums

in a band. With long hair and a penchant for colorful, eccentric clothing, I roamed the streets of Anchorage, oblivious to the coming doom of my unavoidable future.

However, upon turning eighteen, reality hit hard, as I found myself classified 1A in the military draft. The only surefire method for me to avoid conscription into the Army and a subsequent tour of the jungles of Vietnam was to secure a college deferment. Faced with this pressing decision, my idyllic two years of social freedom abruptly ended.

Having always excelled in math and newly inspired by my artistic inclination, my father suggested that architecture might be a fitting career for me. I was accepted into Syracuse University as an architecture major, but due to a late application and a full department, I was asked to begin my studies in the art department, where I could take

applicable electives until a spot opened in architecture.

My first semester was the standard mix of drawing, figure drawing, typography, basic design, art history, and English 101. I genuinely enjoyed those classes, yet I could not conceive making art my career. It seemed an unlikely way to provide for oneself. My only exposure to professional art had been through observing paintings displayed in a store window back in Anchorage. The piece that lingered in my memory was a cliché depiction of a snow-covered cabin illuminated by the Aurora Borealis. This uninspired painting, clearly aimed at attracting tourists, never sold during my time there and encapsulated my limited understanding of art as a viable career path.

As my first year drew to a close, the heads of various majors within the art department delivered

a series of presentations to the freshmen in the fine arts program to enlist them as students within their specific department. By then, I had fully embraced my passion for art, and for the first time, I realized that pursuing a career in this field might lead to a fulfilling and meaningful vocation. After much contemplation, I made the decision to set aside my initial interest in architecture and instead pursue a major in painting without any other plan or goal after graduation.

Choosing painting opened a world of possibilities, as it offered the most freedom in selecting electives. I eagerly explored various courses, delving into metalsmithing, photography, and cinema, allowing my interests to spread across multiple disciplines. Incidentally, this was the best way to learn as it stimulated cross-pollination between the disciplines. While I embarked on this journey without a definite understanding of where

it would ultimately lead, I was convinced that this was my chosen path. My choice to be a painter wasn't planned but rather serendipitous; some might describe it as simply "going with the flow," but in retrospect I always regarded that I "backdoored" myself into it unknowingly.

I soon learned that for painting majors, there were seven basic courses around which the program was structured:

Drawing and Figure Drawing. These two courses are self-explanatory by their very titles.

Central to the program were **Studio Courses or Painting Workshops.** These were hands-on courses allowing students to create paintings while getting feedback from instructors and peers, thus fostering creativity and skill while building confidence.

Color and Light was a vital course focusing on the theory and application of color by the mixing of pigments. At its root were the two systems of color, additive and subtractive; the primary and secondary colors as complimentary colors; chroma or saturation; and values, tints and shades (incidentally the foundation of Edward Weston's Zone System approach to photography, an historical example demonstrating cross-pollination.).

Additionally, we studied how adjacent colors affect perception by the interaction of colors. Examples of this are most notable in the works of Joseph Albers series "Homage to The Square."

Materials and Techniques was the course that covered all the various painting mediums such as oil, acrylic, watercolor, gouache, egg tempera and mixed media, while teaching us about tools, surfaces, and methods of application.

Aesthetics was perhaps my favorite course. I studied the philosophical concepts that were the foundation of each and every art movement by reading manifestos and criticism of the day. Through it, students learned to think critically about their own work and to apply that understanding to observing the work of others.

Art History was different from Aesthetics, in that it was a survey course focused on recognizing the many individual works comprising each art movement through exposure to photographs of their most significant proponents. It was an effort to create an historical perspective in order to see the continual flow of artists toward defining the essence of art.

I enrolled in my first painting course in 1968 and continued until my graduation in 1971. This period was marked by significant political and social

upheaval. Music emerged as a powerful catalyst for change, resonating deeply within the hearts and minds of youth. Embracing ideals of sexual freedom, often referred to as “free love,” many students also experimented with drugs, guided by the ethos to “tune in and drop out.”

Simultaneously, a pervasive fear loomed, as countless young individuals faced the prospect of being drafted into a war they viewed as unjust and immoral. Women were burning their bras as men burned their draft cards and protesters burned the American flag. Window decals of an American flag began appearing on automobiles above the banner “Love It or Leave It.” Such was this country divided.

Trust in our government eroded rapidly in the wake of tragic assassinations that claimed the lives of cherished leaders such as John F. Kennedy,

Martin Luther King Jr., Robert Kennedy, Malcolm X, and, later in 1980, John Lennon. In this climate of disillusionment, artistic expression emerged as a vital instrument for social change. This evolution was amplified by radio stations that carried powerful messages of protest. Artists like Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Frank Zappa, Jimi Hendrix, Marvin Gaye, Creedence Clearwater Revival, Country Joe and the Fish, and Buffalo Springfield collectively inspired radical thought that transcended the medium of music and found expression in various art forms, including painting.

What Is Art?

At the heart of painting lies the profound inquiry: “What is Art?” Western art history reveals a progression of various art movements, each seemingly born as a reaction to the previous movement’s precepts of validity. But on studying art history, you will see that the arc of painting moves through tradition to embrace intellect, emotion and experience in many forms.

Each movement had its own dedicated admirers and advocates. This continues even today as contemporary artists find a haven in the philosophical direction of previous artists. But it would be a mistake to confuse Art with style. When students step into a painting class, they arrive with those same diverse backgrounds, influences, and aspirations, which resist any attempt to categorize them as a singular entity. This diversity adds layers of complexity to the teaching process, challenging instructors to adapt

to a wide range of artistic perspectives and preferences.

Furthermore, painting instructors, each bringing their own unique style and experiences to the classroom, may find themselves at a disadvantage when required to teach techniques outside their realm of expertise. For instance, an abstract expressionist or a color-field painter might struggle to effectively guide students in mastering the nuances of watercolor in the manner of Andrew Wyeth, or in employing the techniques associated with Rembrandt's portrait work. Consequently, students aspiring to hone specific styles and techniques may often feel they are navigating their artistic journeys independently.

Despite this variability, certain foundational elements unite all forms of painting: artistic intent, design, composition, and the mindful use of color and form—whether in abundance or subtlety.

These core principles serve as the backbone of any

painting course, providing a common language for instructors of diverse genres.

It's important to note that there are instances where students seek instruction directly from mentors whose styles resonate with their own aspirations. I recall a notable example from my own experience: my roommate, Frank Trefny, who studied under Gary Trento. Both were figurative artists specializing in nude painting, and Frank flourished under Gary's mentorship, developing his skills and confidence within the framework of their shared artistic vision. This exemplifies the potential for mentorship to ignore the gap of varied backgrounds and develop growth through a supportive relationship of shared style.

But few come to art with a background in art history. No, first we are introduced as children to the act of creation that will wrongly solidify our belief that art is simply a skill. Craft is an art but

only some craft will become Art. Art both reflects and produces a change in society, but that is alone not all there is to it. The nature of Art may well be amorphous, but its essence is fundamental.

From a tender age, many of us are instilled with the idea that good art is characterized by the ability to mirror visual reality. The prevailing belief is that artistry reaches its pinnacle when it closely resembles a photograph; the more lifelike the representation, the higher the accolade bestowed upon the artist.

Young artists are often celebrated for their talent and skill, particularly when their early forays into drawing move beyond simplistic stick figures. As they grow and progress, they may strive to depict three-dimensional form, with an illusion of depth and light. This is the natural consequence of the reinforcement they have already received

regarding their drawings and is often the cornerstone of traditional art courses.

The paper often used by children for their first artwork resembles newsprint, albeit somewhat thicker. At the top of what is usually an 8 1/2 x 11-inch sheet, a jagged display of blue crayon is typical, while at the bottom, a two-inch expanse will feature a similarly textured green base. In the center, a somewhat irregular solid yellow circle is surrounded by radiating lines, clearly representing the sun. Between these vibrant color bands, several stick figures frolic, depicting a family. Likely, one figure represents a father, another a mother, and the third is the very child who created this charming Crayola masterpiece. I was that child.

For many children, such drawings are quite common and often their earliest creation. As they grow, most children become more ambitious,

drawing cars, airplanes, military vehicles like tanks and ships, and even soldiers engaged in battle—scenes they may have seen portrayed on television. These illustrations tell stories, but while not every story originates with the artist, the narrative of family undoubtedly does.

It might be argued that a greater disservice is done by giving children coloring books and teaching them to color within the lines. It may surreptitiously discourage independent thought while promoting conformity, the seeds of malady for the future artist.

From the earliest cave paintings in regions such as Lascaux, France, humanity has sought to memorialize significant events, which in those times often revolved around hunting. What began as a simple act of remembrance gradually evolved into a powerful tool for propaganda. Whether

through the polytheistic depictions of the ancient Romans and Greeks or the religious iconography of early Christians, culminating in magnificent cathedrals, these artistic expressions were meant to convey important stories creating a conventional wisdom. Ultimately, these narratives served not only to recount history but also to propagate faith and beliefs across generations, just as oral fables had carried cultural wisdom before Guttenberg's invention of the printing press and the subsequent availability of books to the common man.

Chapter 1

Why We Paint

The choice to begin painting is extremely personal. For some who are drawn to painting it may begin in early childhood with drawings made in kindergarten and posted on the home refrigerator door. It's a joyous sense of pride for a young child and an important step toward validation, the creation of self-worth.

For others it will require years of study at a college or university in pursuit of a degree in a Fine Art as the foundation of a career.

Many amateur enthusiasts will simply enroll in summer seminars, studying a specific style and technique with an established artist they admire, simply undertaken to develop a skill.

But many are not motivated to undertake painting until their waning senior years, often as a hobby to while away empty hours and fill a growing

loneliness. Likely, they may be introduced to painting through a class in a nursing home or in a senior assisted-living facility. For them it will become a social, communal experience, less about making art than making friends.

But in one respect all painters are equal. Their process begins with a blank canvas, of limitless possibilities. This moment heralds the critical question: "What shall I paint?" For serious artists, there will likely be a reference behind this fundamental decision that shapes their choice of genre, their subject matter and an application process. For others it may just be the circumstance that they find themselves in, such as a class that dictates the choice by way of requirements.

In contrast, some artists approach painting as a journey of discovery, embracing the spontaneity of the medium. In this freeform exploration, each

application of paint becomes an invitation to engage with color and form, prompting the artist to evaluate every brushstroke, embrace risks, and view mistakes as fertile ground for new ideas. This interplay of intention and exploration underscores the importance of grasping the philosophical foundations articulated in the manifestos of various art movements. Such knowledge is vital for those committed to their craft and aspiring to create something that transcends mere painting into Art. After all, anyone can produce a painting, but few achieve the status of creating true Art. Much like how every child with paper and a pen may learn how to write yet not all become authors, the ability to express thought and emotion through the visual arts demands both intellect and intention. When viewed historically the recognition of Art becomes distilled into a more pure understanding through each succeeding art movement seeking to reduce art to its most basic

element.

In essence, just as writing is a thinking, painting embodies a unique mode of thought, Art becomes the powerful codification of these thoughts, transformed into tangible expression that resonates with others. Painting is thinking.

But why do we do it? What compels us to translate the world, or the worlds within us, on to a two-dimensional surface? The answers are as varied as the colors on an artist's palette.

So, let's delve deeper into the reasons why people are drawn to painting. These reasons can be emotional, psychological or experiential in nature. No one comes to painting in quite the same way as another.

Compulsion seems like an inappropriate word to

begin our understanding of why we paint. But for many, they simply just can't help it, drawn like the moth to the flame. It's who they are, a part of their very being that may not be understood or even be consciously aware of but driving them just the same. It's intrinsic, an almost uncontrollable urge to create. For some individuals, painting is not a choice but a necessity like breathing. It's a fundamental exercise of their being, a way of processing the world and making sense of their experiences. This inherent passion fuels their creativity and compels them to expression, regardless of any external factors. It's an internal fire that demands to be addressed.

Painting can also be a powerful cathartic experience, allowing individuals to process and release difficult emotions. The act of transferring emotions onto a canvas can be therapeutic, providing a way to externalize inner turmoil and

gain a sense of control. The physical act of painting, the movement of the brush, and the blending of colors can be a release, a sense of calm, allowing for emotional processing without the need for words.

High on the list of reasons may be the desire for recognition and validation, a natural human tendency and the foundation for self-esteem. For some artists, sharing their work and receiving positive feedback provides a sense of accomplishment and worth. Exhibitions, art competitions, and online platforms offer opportunities to showcase their paintings and connect with a wider audience. The validation received from others reinforces their identity as an artist and motivates them to continue creating.

Many artists feel this strong desire to share their work with others, perhaps connect on an emotional level, to spark conversations, or to offer their

unique perspective on the world. Sharing artwork can create a sense of community and foster a dialogue between the artist and their audience. It's a way to contribute to the cultural landscape and leave a lasting impact and be remembered.

Perhaps the most fundamental reason we paint is the inherent human desire to express ourselves. To express and communicate is the core driver for most artists. Painting engenders a visual language that transcends spoken or written words. It allows individuals to convey complex emotions, abstract ideas, and personal experiences that might be difficult, perhaps even impossible, to articulate otherwise. Trapped in the limitations of language, words can sometimes fail us. Painting, however, transcends those boundaries. It allows us to communicate emotions, thoughts, and experiences that defy verbal description. Colors like blues and greys might be used to convey sadness or grief,

while vibrant, warm yellows and oranges could embody feelings of happiness. Through color, texture, and composition, we externalize our inner world, making it visible, tangible to contemplate and empathize with. This act of creation can be profoundly cathartic, a way to process emotions and make sense of our experiences. It's a way to say, "This is how I see the world. This is my reaction."

And there can be no denying that there's a unique satisfaction in taking raw materials – brushes, canvas and pigments – and making something new, something that didn't exist before. This act of creation is inherently rewarding. It's a form of play, a way to experiment and explore without the constraints of practicality. Mixing colors, experimenting with different brushstrokes, and watching as the image gradually emerges, this process can be incredibly absorbing, drawing us

into a state of flow where time seems to disappear. The joy lies not just in the final product but in the journey of its creation. It's the thrill of bringing something into being, of leaving our mark on the world, however small.

By its nature painting is entirely visual, so it's only logical that the intricate patterns revealed in all of nature to the majestic sweep of a broad landscape, to the chaotic interplay of light on clouds, the world around us becomes a constant source of visual inspiration.

Painting allows us to react to these fleeting moments in time and examine them more closely. It's a way to react to the world, the interplay of light and shadow, the subtle nuances of color, and the intricate details that often go unnoticed in our otherwise busy lives. By attempting to interpret these visual experiences, we deepen our

understanding of them, developing a keener eye for observation and a greater appreciation for all that surrounds us.

Nevertheless, we must recognize that at its pinnacle, painting is an art form with a rich and storied history stretching back to the earliest cave paintings. Through painting we continue a long lineage of artists, joining a conversation that spans centuries. We learn from the techniques of the masters, drawing inspiration from their works and build upon their legacy. This connection to the past gives our own work a deeper context, placing it within a broader cultural and historical framework. It's a way to honor the artists who came before us and to contribute our own voice to the ongoing evolution of the form, at first to expand the definition of what constitutes Art and then eventually to distill it to its purest essence.

This will become a lifelong pursuit of mastery, a continuous process of learning and improvement. There's always a new technique to explore, a new style to experiment with, a new challenge to overcome. This pursuit can be incredibly motivating, driving us to push our boundaries and constantly strive for greater skill and artistry. It's a journey of self-discovery, where we not only develop our artistic abilities but also gain a deeper understanding of ourselves and our potential.

But it would be naïve to think that everyone who comes to painting has lofty intentions. For many, painting may be just a hobby, to pass the time. Painting can be a relaxing and enjoyable pastime. It offers a creative outlet and a sense of calm after a long day. The process can be meditative and absorbing, providing a welcome escape from the stresses of daily life, a way to engage in creative activity without the pressure of professional

expectations.

These are just a few of the many reasons why we paint. It's a deeply personal and multifaceted activity, driven by a complex interplay of motivations. But at its core, painting is about connection – a connection to oneself, to the world around us, and the essence of humanity. Through painting we come to understand who we are.