

Painting with Acrylics

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Here is a brief description of how I use acrylic paints outdoors. I've highlighted the absolute minimum you will need to bring to participate in my workshops.

Acrylics dry fast and thin, enabling me to continually repaint areas without losing freshness. When my first thin wash works, I can leave it alone and enjoy almost the brilliance of watercolor. If, as usually happens, I want to rework or adjust shapes, I am able to paint over the dry layer immediately.

I've now been a landscape painter for over nearly 30 years, and am still crazy about acrylics. In order to adapt to the special requirements of painting on location, I've devised a simple paint-and-time-saving system for taking acrylics into the open air—and, in fact, I use the basic elements of this system in the studio.

PAINT BOX. Buy a fishing tackle box (NOT an art bin) with molded dividers--one compartment for each color. The molded dividers are important because paint can leak from one compartment to another if the dividers are the slip-in kind. Buy a box that forms a groove where the lid closes over the bottom. This is superior to a simple lid, which may allow moisture to escape too quickly.

I like Plano model 6102; here is a link to the Plano website:

<http://www.planomolding.com/content/index.cfm?siteaction=product&ineid=4&groupid=11§ionid=36&partid=196>

I spoon enough color into each compartment to last for three or four painting sessions (maybe a rounded teaspoon of some colors, several tablespoons of white), and arrange the colors as I would on a conventional palette, working from the greens through the blues to purple on the bottom layer; yellows through reds to magenta and purple on the top layer; fitting white and violet oxide where there is room.

SPRAY BOTTLE. This is essential when painting outdoors. If possible, locate yourself under a tree. But when you're in the sun, especially on dry or windy days, you'll need to lightly but repeatedly mist your paints. If you paint inside for any length of time, add a couple of spoons of vinegar to the spray water to kill mold spores. Ultraviolet light takes care of this for outdoor painters.

FOLDING EASEL. I use a half-size Jullian French easel, but I am no longer recommending them due to quality control issues. Mine is several years old and better made than the ones currently being sold. You may want to try a

Jullian original half easel or try the newer, cheaper Plein Air easel made by Jullian.

You can add comfortable padded, adjustable shoulder straps, made for backpacks and available at mountaineering stores, or, as I prefer to do, slip the easel into a small backpack. Beats carrying it in one hand, and I can put my water bottle in the pack and my stool folded on top!

FOLDING STOOL OR TABLE. I use a simple folding stool to support the paint box if I'm hiking any distance. Closer to my car, I like a somewhat taller and more stable **folding plastic side table made for backyards and picnics, available at hardware stores or places like Target or Costco.** The strain on my back is less if I don't have to bend over so far each time I pick up a dab of paint.

PALETTE. Since it's impossible to remove dried-on layers of acrylic paint from the beautiful folding wooden palette which comes with the French easel, give the palette to an oil-painting buddy and **make a throw-away palette out of two pieces of foam board or cardboard, cut to fit inside your folded French easel. Hinge the two pieces together to make a folding palette.** This is lightweight and cheap, and can be used for months until paint buildup renders it too heavy. It's not necessary to gesso it before using. I set this open palette crosswise on the drawer of the French easel, open the fishing tackle box on the stool, and then proceed to pick up bits of paint from the tackle box and mix them on the palette. This frees up my hands so I can use one to hold the brush and the other to hold **a good cotton paint rag.**

CANVAS. I love white portrait canvas that will show brilliantly through a thin wash. Synthetic canvas is great for using with acrylic, although I have come to prefer linen. **I highly recommend linen-covered panels from Tim Giles of New Traditions Art Panels, 801-825-7806. Tim's email address is: newtraditions@bigplanet.com**

These panels are not cheap (though they probably cost less than any other linen panel you will find), but they are archival, high quality, and extremely lightweight for their size and hence great for air travel. There are several linen surfaces to choose from, and if you tell Tim you plan to use the panels for acrylic, he will order acrylic-primed linen. These panels have the most beautiful surface I've ever found. They're slightly rough—just enough to grab the paint—but with a fine weave.

For a very short trip, I might take only a few panels, my paint box (already filled to capacity), an extra tube of white, brushes, French easel, and **a couple of**

plastic water holders (I like one-quart yogurt containers). I also take a screw-top plastic half-gallon water bottle for carrying water to the site, and pack my oldest T-shirts to wear. As each is ready for the wash it becomes the next day's paint rag. Do not use paper towels! They're useless for acrylic painting, and you'll save a lot of trees over the years by using rags.

My friend Pat keeps a bucket of water near her washing machine and throws her acrylic paint rags in it as they accumulate; every so often she dedicates a hot water wash just to cleaning rags.

When my heart is set on taking canvases by plane, I find buying sizes that nest within each other is a space-saving trick (30x30", 24x24", 18x18", and 12x12", for example). Or if I'm hesitant to take all the same shape, I try to get one dimension the same so they are easy to bind together with a strap, for example 10x20", 16x20", 20x20", 20x24", and 20x30".

Most recently I've pared this down to two sizes and shapes—18x20" and 10x18"; these can be layered with the two smaller panels exactly fitting between one larger panel, the whole package bound with a Velcro strap in each direction. The 10x18 panels can be slipped in behind my folded French easel and carried inside the backpack.

PAINTS. My palette consists mostly of cadmium and quinacridone colors. This is because you can always simulate any earth tone by mixing these colors, but if you use only earth tones you can never get a bright cadmium orange.

Painting with high quality paints with excellent tinting ability is an absolute necessity. It's impossible to achieve great results with mediocre materials. **Scrupulously avoid any paint called a "hue," which is another way of saying the color has been approximated with cheaper pigments. Also avoid student grade paints, which have lots of filler and relatively little pigment.**

Currently I use mainly Golden heavy body acrylics.

Golden ACRY 8oz Titanium White
Golden ACRY 2oz Primary Yellow
Golden ACRY 2oz Cadmium Yellow Medium
Golden ACRY 2oz Cadmium Orange
Golden ACRY 2oz Cadmium Red Light
Golden ACRY 2 oz Primary Magenta
Golden ACRY 2oz Dioxazine Purple
Golden ACRY 2oz. Chrome Oxide Green
Golden ACRY 2oz Permanent Green Light

Golden ACRY 2 oz Turquoise
Golden ACRY 2oz Primary Cyan
Golden ACRY 2oz Cobalt Blue
Golden ACRY 2oz Ultramarine Blue
Golden ACRY 2oz Violet Oxide

For Hooker's Green, I highly recommend you buy Miami Brera 60ML Hookers Green.

You must have at least white and the three primary colors I've highlighted in order to be able to mix the full range of hues.

These brands can be obtained through Art Supply Warehouse. Golden Heavy Body Acrylics, Liquitex High Viscosity, and Maimeri Brera are all high quality paints.

To those who use only a few colors and like to mix as much as possible, I'd encourage you to do that as long as your palette contains at least the primary colors highlighted in red, plus titanium white. Working from primaries (as opposed to a limited palette that does not give a full range of color) will give you a great knowledge of both color and value.

Since I spent 15 years working with a bare-bones palette, I now relish using a full range of colors. If you can afford it and have no problem establishing values, I recommend you use a full palette.

BRUSHES. You can truly suffer trying to make a painting with bad brushes. A good brush is a tool that will help you easily accomplish what you want. My favorites are the Isacryl brushes by Isabey, and the University Gold brushes by Winsor & Newton. These are both synthetics, but they have plenty of snap and retain their shape for years. **You should have at least one large (1" or wider) quality brush.** I like brights because they are short and stiff; I like to carve shapes with their thin edges.

For the smallest brushes, buy flats or filberts rather than brights. In the small sizes, a bright will splay almost immediately; because it is proportionately longer, a flat isn't so likely to do this.

I keep some old **bristle brushes** around for times when I want a fuzzier, easier edge. If you use both oils and acrylics, or if you have a lot of leftover bristle brushes you formerly used for oils, they can be *great* for acrylics. All that

oil paint will have conditioned them beautifully and they'll far outlast bristle brushes you buy and use just for acrylics.

The method. Acrylic paint lends itself particularly well to working as I do, spontaneously but with a tendency to continuously assess and rework. I begin by using a large brush--an inch and a half or two inches wide isn't too big for a large canvas--to create large areas of color. I ordinarily skip drawing altogether, as I have found that I see and focus differently when I am using a tool that makes lines as opposed to a tool that creates planes of color. Even an excellent line drawing is doomed to be eradicated as I see the shapes differently with a brush in my hand.

Covering the canvas completely with large areas of color shows me whether the composition is workable and roughly sets values. At this stage I often work transparently, and since I begin with a white primed canvas or panel the transparent paint can produce vibrant clear effects.

Still using the large brush, I gradually refine colors and shapes, making sure the composition has the force I want. It's hard to resist the pull to go straight to detail, but I've found that nothing ruins a painting so fast as getting out a small brush too early. Very few artists have the skill to keep all the values, shapes and colors correct while working solely with a small brush.

Since acrylics tend to dry toward the middle tones—that is, the lights dry darker than they look when wet, and the darks dry somewhat lighter—I've developed the habit of unwittingly exaggerating value relationships when I paint. I do the same for color, though not for any logical reason. I just emphasize the colors I like best--that's why my paintings tend to be skimpy on earth tones.

As my painting comes into focus, I shift to progressively smaller brushes. But if I see the painting going awry, I go back to a big brush and ruthlessly repaint.

I avoid putting in details because I believe each viewer needs to bring something to the work. Painting every blade of grass can turn a poem into a tract.