



# *cultivating a sketchbook practice*

*tips, suggestions and inspiration to guide you on your journey*

by Anne Butera

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## *My Sketchbook Story*

I've always loved sketchbooks. Or at least the idea of them. When I was in my early 20s I lived in Cleveland with my now husband. He was going to the Cleveland Institute of Art and at one point I had a job there, but art school seemed foreign to me. At the art museum or the botanical gardens I would see students from CIA with their sketchbooks; I wanted to be like them. I scribbled in notebooks all the time, but my notebooks were lined and my scribbles were words. I loved art, but writing was my first language, art my second. I was 33 when I first started to imagine I could learn it. For a long, long time I felt like an outsider. I envied those artists their sketchbooks. I wanted to be able to create like they did, but I was resigned to a belief that I was not an artist. Thinking back on it makes me sad, but also angry. I spent so many years thinking I could never be an artist, imposing limitations on my creativity and on my life.



Although art is a huge part of my life now, I still have carryovers from my earlier thinking. Working in a sketchbook was not a natural habit for me and it took a lot of practice for me to overcome my negativity. In truth I sometimes still feel a bit of fear when faced with the blank page. (I've talked with many artists over the years and learned that this is natural. We all have fears, no matter our experience or skill level, so let's be gentle with ourselves, ok?).

One turning point in my art journey was a collaboration I did with artist Dana Barbieri. Dana and I each filled up half of a sketchbook and then switched, filling in the blank pages inspired by each other's work. We shared our sketchbook collaboration weekly on our blogs and Instagram. Our project was eventually featured in UPPERCASE Magazine.



The collaboration helped to push me beyond my fears. The obligation of working with someone else held me accountable. The fact that we were sharing our pages each week online also helped with accountability. Sharing weekly gave my practice structure and regularity, both integral to forming a habit.



What was even more valuable about this collaboration was the inspiration it sparked. I began to look at each blank page and see endless possibilities instead of just blankness. Imagery, texture, medium, color... each brought idea after idea.



My first collaboration with Dana finished up in the summer of 2016. Since then I've created so much art in and out of sketchbooks. I challenged myself to keeping a daily sketchbook, took on a couple daily painting challenges and collaborated on another sketchbook project with Dana.

During each of these challenges I learned that **making a lot of art inspires even more art.**

My experience overcoming resistance, hesitancy and fear has made me passionate about encouraging others to overcome their own fears, embrace their creativity and discover their joy. I'm excited to be sharing what I've learned with you. I hope you'll find it helpful in your own art journey. Please reach out with questions or to share your thoughts. I love connecting and hearing others' stories. My virtual door is always open!

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## *Why keep a sketchbook?*

Each of us is unique and each of us has our own “why(s)” for our sketchbooks, but I’ve found our reasons often overlap. Here are some of my “whys:

- practice and learn (techniques, materials, skills)
- explore ideas
- play with color
- plan other projects – paintings, surface design, block prints, sculptures, sewing projects, etc.
- keep a record of the seasons in nature or the garden
- observation
- capture a moment on paper
- artistic expression
- remember a trip or vacation
- as a journal

What is/are your “why(s)” for your sketchbook?

## *Choosing a sketchbook*

Which sketchbook is right for you? There are so many choices! It helps to first look at your “why”, consider your materials and think about your practice (where and how you’ll be using your sketchbook) and let those factors help determine your choice. Although I’m a big proponent of using what you have, if you already have a sketchbook and avoid using it, maybe it’s not the right sketchbook for you.

Attributes to keep in mind when choosing your sketchbook:

- **Binding** – spiral bound, hardbound, softcover – spiral bound and some other sketchbooks will lie flat; hardbound books often do not and are sometimes harder to work in. Also, depending on the size



of the book a spiral binding might get in the way of your working in it.

- **Number of pages** – books with more pages can be cost effective, but starting with a book with fewer pages might feel less daunting.
- **Size** – smaller sketchbooks travel more easily and can feel less intimidating than books with very large pages, but on the flip side a small book might feel cramped.



- **Paper type** – the type of paper will determine what media you can use in your book. Most sketchbooks will give recommendations for media: drawing, dry media, mixed media, watercolor, etc. The weight of the paper will also be indicated. Heavier paper withstands more abuse and can take wetter media. If you want to use watercolor, look for the heaviest paper you can find. My favorite weight is 140 lb. Books with acid free or pH neutral paper will give the best longevity for your pages.
- **Binding your own book or working on loose pages** is also an option. Loose pages can be kept separate or they can be pasted onto the pages of any sketchbook, giving even the humblest book many more possibilities.

### **My favorite sketchbooks:**

- Strathmore 500 Series Softcover Mixed Media Sketchbooks – this is the type of sketchbook I used for both my collaborations with Dana Barbieri. I've also used one on my own and loved working in each one. The 90 lb



mixed media paper stands up to many different materials. It even works well with watercolor and is especially nice with gouache. Unlike some watercolor paper (which can be too rough), it works well with micron pens. These books come in a variety of sizes and the softcover design lays flat (I've found it helpful to use binder clips or clothespins to hold the pages open). The 500 series comes with different paper types and also as hardbound books. They have 64 pages.



- Strathmore Visual Journals – these spiral bound books have hard covers and come in a variety of sizes. I've used both the 90 lb mixed media version (twice) and one with 140 lb watercolor paper. Both are lovely to work in. They have 44 pages.
- Canson XL Mix Media Sketchbooks – when I first saw them in stores I discounted these books as being “cheap”. I wish I hadn't! They have bright blue board covers, spiral binding, 120 microperforated pages and are inexpensive. The 98 lb mix media paper holds up well to lots of different materials, though I used mine mostly with marker, pen, pencil and for collage. The inexpensive price tag and the fact that these sketchbooks have a lot of pages makes this one of the easiest (least intimidating) sketchbooks to work in. Although I never rip pages out of my sketchbooks (I find it helpful to have a record of how far I've come), with this book if you really don't like a page you can easily tear it out.

A note about “beautiful” sketchbooks: It's easy to be attracted to a beautifully bound sketchbook and imagine filling its pages with amazing artwork, but I've



found that a special book can itself be a deterrent to making art. There's too much pressure with a beautiful book. It becomes precious and we fear "ruining" its pages. Sometimes a cheap sketchbook is the best choice.

I've filled up many sketchbooks over the years and always have a few books going at once (each has a different purpose).



Trying new sketchbooks has helped me to learn what I like and what I don't like. Which book is right for each artist is a personal choice (and determined by many factors!). Some of my preferences have changed over the years and yours might, too. For example, I used to like working in small books, but now



smaller pages feel cramped to me. Always listen to your feelings and go with them. You have them for a reason!

## *Materials, Tools and Techniques*

One of the most fun things about using a sketchbook is the chance to play and experiment with different materials. There is such freedom in using a sketchbook to learn this way! Let your curiosity guide you. Use the materials that most speak to you. Perhaps you won't like them all, but don't give up if your first reaction is that you don't. Often those feelings come from fear and from discomfort with inexperience. I hated markers when I first started using them, but eventually I came to have fun with them.

Below are some materials, tools and techniques I like to use in my sketchbook practice. Please don't feel limited to this list!



### **Paint:**

- Watercolor – I prefer pan watercolor paints and use three brands: Winsor & Newton, Sennelier and Yarka St. Petersburg. I've also just recently tried Kuretake pan watercolors which are much more affordable and come in sets with many beautiful colors. If you're new to watercolor, one of these sets would be a fun choice to start with.
- Gouache is a more opaque type of watercolor and is a bit easier to use than watercolor. I like Holbein's Artist's Gouache.

- Craft acrylic paint is a much more economical paint and I've recently enjoyed using it in my sketchbooks. I use the Craft Smart brand (available at Michaels). It comes in sets with many beautiful colors that mix wonderfully. The pages I've created with it look very much like gouache. When using more water, it can yield watercolor-like effects. I've mixed it with gouache and the two paints mix and blend well. Once dried it does not reactivate on the page (or palette) like gouache or watercolor, giving you the ability to paint light over dark without color bleeding.





## Palettes

I don't know what brand my mixing palette is, but you can find similar palettes at many art/craft stores and online. Search for "20 well palette".



I like the large mixing spaces and the room for many colors. I've also been using plastic plates for mixing gouache (white ceramic plates from thrift stores are another nice option) and a disposable pad of palette sheets when using acrylic paint so I don't have to wash the paint down the drain.

## Brushes

Use whatever you have or feel comfortable with and upgrade when you can afford to. Very cheap brushes can be frustrating. They may shed hairs. The ferrule may be loose. With one set of cheap brushes I found the varnish cracked and peeled from the handles, landing in my paint at inopportune times! I prefer using synthetic brushes with my watercolors because I've found that they allow me to paint finer lines. I also don't have to worry about animal cruelty when using synthetic fibers.

- The Princeton Velvetouch Long Rounds are my current favorites because they have such a narrow, fine tip even with the larger brush sizes. They're also fairly inexpensive.

- I also use pointed round brushes from the Blick Master Series (which are guaranteed for life. Dick Blick has sent me replacements for these brushes when I felt they weren't holding up well).
- I keep the brushes I use for watercolor separate from the brushes I use for acrylic because I don't want to wear out my watercolor brushes using them with harsher paints.



Please treat your brushes with care and they'll last a long time. Never leave your brushes tip down in your water jar for any extended period of time and always be sure to rinse your brushes and store them tip up to dry. I've found that plain water is enough to clean watercolor and gouache, but acrylics may need a little soap. Be gentle!

### **Pens and Markers**

Pens are a relatively inexpensive splurge if you're looking for some new supplies. Here are a few of my favorites:

- I love using black micron pens in various sizes for drawing and sketching.
- Tombow Calligraphy pens are also great, allowing you to vary the thickness of your mark making.



- I've had a lot of fun playing with the Pentel Pocket Brush Pen because it makes a variety of marks. The long brush tip allows you to create thin, dark lines or thicker "brush-y" lines.
- White gel pens (Sakura Gelly Rolls are great) are fun to use on dark paper or on top of paint.
- Tombow and Sakura Koi Markers are a nice change of pace if you haven't used them before. Markers take a little getting used to, but can create beautiful effects. Colorless blenders allow you to mix and blend colors on the page.
- Krylon Metallic Leafing Pens (I have Silver and 18 KT Gold) are the shiniest metallic paint markers I have found. So much fun! They work well with watercolor and mixed media paper and are a nice accent on pages with other media.



## Pencils

- I mostly use a simple, cheap mechanical pencil for sketching. I especially like the kind that come with a long eraser that twists up as you use it.
- Although I don't use them a lot, Prismacolor colored pencils are wonderful to work with. They won't smear like other colored pencils and they blend beautifully.



## Collage

When I don't feel in the mood to paint or draw, collage is a fun option. Any material can be used in collage from recycled junk mail to fabric scraps to old maps to papers you've painted specifically for that purpose.

Collage can also be combined with painting or drawing. It can be used to create an image or replicate a quilt or simply celebrate color and texture. I have one sketchbook I use specifically for collage; I don't like its paper for drawing and it's too thin for painting, but perfect for collage.

A child's glue stick, Mod Podge (painted on with a brush) or a tape runner are all good choices for adhering your pieces to the page.





### **Block Printing**

I am no expert at block printing, but enjoy experimenting with it. I use my sketchbook pages when designing blocks and then I use them again to print test the carved block. In my collaborative sketchbooks I also created block prints as my responses to some of Dana's pages.

- If you're interested in trying block printing, I recommend the Speedball Deluxe Block Printing Kit. It has everything you need to get started.
- The Dick Blick Blue Easy-to-Cut blocks are an inexpensive surface to practice your carving.



I hope some of these materials resonate with you and inspire you to begin creating! Which other materials or tools are you curious about? What else would you like to try? Write a list here (and on the top of the next page):



## *Finding Inspiration*

*"Inspiration exists, but it has to find you working"*

– Pablo Picasso



In truth, inspiration is EVERYWHERE, all around you EVERY day.

Here's where I find inspiration:

- nature
- my garden (and indoors, my houseplants)
- museums
- books (art books, nature books, gardening books, field guides, children's picture books, novels)
- magazines

- shops (art supply stores, thrift shops, antique shops, garden centers, gift shops, yarn shops, fabric shops, etc.)
- music
- movies
- other artists (and classes taken with other artists)

In a more general way I find inspiration in:

- COLOR
- SHAPE
- TEXTURE

What inspires you? Write some ideas here:

**Feeling uninspired? Seek it out.** Keep your list of what inspires you in mind and take an inspiration adventure. Here are some suggestions:

- Go for a walk – take a look at what inspires you. Nature? Architecture? Shadows on the pavement? There's no right or wrong answer. Gather bits to bring home or and/or take photographs of what you see.
- Visit the library and check out some books – maybe they're art books with many photos of famous artists' works. Maybe they're art books



teaching a technique. Maybe they're coffee table travel books or children's picture books or field guides or books about flower arranging – bring home an armload of whatever catches your eye.

- Invite a friend to sketch with you and take some time looking at each others' sketchbooks. Maybe even swap books and each do a page in the other's book.
- Go to a museum, gallery or shop filled with interesting things. If photography is allowed, take a few photos. You can also spend some time sketching or simply write a list of what you find most inspiring. Is it the use of color in a certain artist's work? The shape of a sculpture? The texture of yarn in a craft store... Pay attention to what catches your eye and your interest.



### *Designing Your Art Practice*

- Schedule your sketchbook work. Determine the best time of day for you and set aside time to work then.
- Working in your sketchbook daily is ideal, but maybe that won't work for your schedule. Decide how many times a week you want to work in your sketchbook and which days of the week are best for you. Then plan time to do it.

- Set realistic goals for and don't put too much pressure on yourself to perform.
- Work with prompts – use those provided on page 27 and/or create your own.
- It can be helpful to date your pages. A date stamp is fun to use and makes dating pages easy.
- Give yourself a time limit. It can also help to set a timer. Working in your sketchbook in small bites is an easy, low pressure way to make sure you're creating every day.
- Listen to something while you're working in your sketchbook. Having music, an audiobook or podcast playing in the background can help quiet your inner critic.
- Steal time. Sketching while you watch tv, wait for dinner to cook or during your child's music lesson is a great way to fit a sketchbook practice into your days.
- To share or not to share? Sharing your pages (with a friend, on social media, on your blog, etc.) can help hold you accountable, but it can also be stifling. Do what works best for you and don't be afraid to change your mind along the way.
- **Enjoy yourself!** Remember to have fun! Working in a sketchbook can certainly be work, but it can (and should) also be enjoyable. A sketchbook can be a place for play as well as work. It's the act of keeping a sketchbook that is most important, not what you see on the finished page.





## *What if I'm feeling stuck?*

### **Creative blocks are often caused by fear**

We're afraid of failure. We're afraid of criticism. We're afraid we're not as good as so-and-so or that we're not a "real artist." All artists have these feelings from time to time. Don't let fear stop you from creating. Acknowledge your feelings then move on.

### **Ebbs are as natural as flows**

Although it can be frustrating and disheartening when you're feeling uninspired, know that it is completely natural to feel uninspired from time to time. Creativity ebbs and flows. Sometimes you're filled with energy and ideas and sometimes you're just not. Every artist has these feelings (I certainly do!). Sometimes you just need to give yourself a break. Conversely, sometimes you need to keep creating even if you don't feel it.



### **Trust yourself, give yourself time and take care of yourself**

Trust your preferences. Listen to your instincts (even if they're telling you something different from what I'm saying). Creative slumps can take time to overcome. Take things slow, be easy and gentle with yourself. Self care is so important. Doing things that make you feel good will contribute to your overall

health and well-being. Get enough sleep and exercise. Eat healthy meals and drink enough water. I've found that writing my thoughts down in private journals helps me to clear my mind of worries. I try to write in my journal everyday. I'm always more consistent with this than with my sketchbooks (and I'm ok with this!).

### **Collect ideas**

It's always great to have a collection of ideas for when you're feeling uninspired. Write down different things you'd like to draw or paint. Write down different techniques you'd like to try. (Use the lists you've already made in this book and create others). Collect photographs of flowers or buildings or animals or landscapes that you'd like to paint or draw or collage. When you're feeling stuck return to your lists.

### **Find inspiration offline**

The internet is FULL of inspiration, but looking at pretty pictures online can keep us from creating. Get outside. Take an inspiration adventure like I shared earlier. Whether you're inspired by the beauty of nature or by watching a new independent film or by seeing the paintings of the masters, follow your interests or try something new. This world is filled with wonders.



### **Vary what you do**

Doing the same thing over and over again can keep you from growing and developing as an artist. Try new things. Experiment. Play. If you always work on small pages, try working on one that's large. If your work is always very detailed, try working more loosely. Sometimes we get in a rut and it contributes to our



slumped feelings. Working on other types of creative activities can be extremely energizing, too. Perhaps you like music or sewing or cooking or photography... creating in different ways can help you to move past a block.

### **Be wary of social media**

As wonderful as social media can be for inspiration and for encouragement (doesn't it feel good when someone "likes" a piece of art that you share?), it can also be a pitfall contributing to your creative slump. If you find yourself comparing your art to the art of other people and feeling bad about it, or looking at your numbers of "likes" or "followers" and getting discouraged, step away from social media for a while. Seeing all the perfectly styled and curated photographs on Instagram and Pinterest can be stifling to your creativity and contribute to feelings of fear and inadequacy. Listen to your feelings and choose the right course of action for you.



### *Some final words of encouragement*

When you make art every day, working through the beginning, middle and end of a page, you get into the flow, the rhythm. You become adept at fixing mistakes. You get the feel of the paint and the water or the pen and the paper. You're more flexible when trying something new. Plus, when you create a little bit each day without the pressure of success, there's less fear, less frustration and

fewer failures. If a page doesn't work out, it's not important.

Having a bit of detachment from the outcome makes creating easier. That's true for just about every kind of creating.



I know some of us have a hard time creating in our sketchbooks and become frustrated if the page we create isn't pretty enough. It's so easy to become frustrated when we compare our work to an outside (imaginary) ideal. The pressure to share our work (and have it perfect enough to share) can be limiting and frustrating as well.



Each of us has to decide what is right for ourselves. What's right for me, won't necessarily be right for you. What's right for you, won't necessarily be right for me. And that's the way it should be. It's so easy to feel the pressure of what "everyone else" is doing. Don't. Do what's right for you. Always.



My goal in teaching and sharing what I've learned is to help you shatter obstacles. I want to encourage you to be curious and playful and embrace creating for its own sake in whatever way(s) bring you joy. Your voice and your vision are valid. Trust them! The world needs what you (and only you) can bring to it!



Because it took me so many years to do it myself, I want to encourage you to explore new avenues (TODAY!), to try things you've never tried before, to ask the question *what if?* Before I embarked on my creative journey I would never have dreamed it would be possible for me, a non-artist, to start painting. When I saw examples of other non-artists embracing art, I began to start dreaming and eventually *doing*.



I know it's all too easy to look at what other people are making and creating, whether it be on blogs, Instagram, Pinterest and feel overwhelmed or deflated, as if what you're doing (or even just dreaming) isn't enough – good enough, interesting enough, big enough... whatever.

There's not an easy solution to that. All you can do is just keep going. Still your thoughts and pick up a paintbrush (or pen or camera or crochet hook or whisk...) and create. *That* is the important thing. To create. To bring something into the world that wasn't there before. It's certainly good for us when we do it and it's good for the world when we do it, too.

A sketchbook is an easy outlet for creating. It's small. It's contained. It can be

private. It can be a springboard into other projects. It can be a meditation. It can be a pep talk. It can be a playground. It can be a celebration. It can be a collaboration. It can be *whatever you want it to be*.



Now go. Make something.



## Some prompts for your sketchbook pages

flower	plain	race	favorite
blue	crumpled	practice	cozy
insect	happy	flight	clouds
paisley	bird	animal	warm
layered	sky	zigzag	spring
sunshine	striped	red	wisp
play	yellow	dots	simple
kitchen	garden	forest	monochromatic
leaf	city	winter	historical
plaid	organic	windows	tiny
dark	cups	grid	contained
memory	feather	complex	chevron
fantasy	gilded	map	green
cool	light	purple	detail
recipe	bubbles	opposite	vegetable
flat	serene	dramatic	rough
free	storm	trash	autumn
bowls	lush	holiday	fold
summer	watercolor	glow	expansive
rain	patchwork	fruit	flash
round	plant	snow	rainbow

## About the author

Anne Butera is a self-taught artist who finds inspiration in the beauty of her garden and the magic of nature.



She works primarily in watercolor but also loves challenging herself to try new things. She strives to seek out and celebrate life's little joys and daily graces.



Anne and her husband left the city and relocated to a small town in beautiful southwest Wisconsin in order to live a slower, simpler, more intentional life. They live in a little house with blue shutters with two retired racing greyhounds and two black and white rescue cats.

Anne writes the blog *My Giant Strawberry*; teaches in person and online; and sells her art, designs, and fabric on her website and elsewhere on the web.

Anne's paintings have been exhibited across the country and her art and writing have been published in magazines and in the book *Botanica*.

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