

A watercolor palette with various colors and a brush, next to a strip of paper with colored circles. The palette contains several wells of paint in shades of pink, red, orange, green, and blue. A brush with a gold ferrule and a pink handle lies diagonally across the bottom right. To the left, a strip of white paper features a vertical row of eight circular watercolor swatches in shades of pink, orange, green, and yellow.

# Getting Started With Watercolor

a guide to cultivating  
a joyful art practice

by *Anne Butera*



## *My Story*

I've always loved art and making things. As a child I created constantly, but like many people, moved away from art-making as I grew up and decided I wasn't good at it. Creativity took other forms in my life. Writing. Crafting. Gardening. I was 33 when I first started to imagine I could learn how to paint and draw. For a long, long time after I started playing around with paint I felt like an outsider, like I wasn't a real artist. I wanted to be able to create like one, but I was resigned to a belief that I wasn't 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 others' work. We shared our sketchbook collaboration weekly on our blogs and Instagram. Our project was eventually featured in UPPERCASE Magazine, a dream come true for me.



Collaborating with another artist 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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## Getting Started

I am a self-taught artist and when I first started learning how to paint with watercolor I wanted to paint *things*. Plants and flowers were my first love and I dove into painting them without much success. Looking back I wish I had spent some time initially just getting to know the paint, learning how to mix colors and playing without expectation of painting *something*. Through trial and error I eventually learned about color mixing and the properties of watercolor. I learned about the different types of paper and which brushes I preferred to use. But all of the techniques and skills I learned were secondhand (and they came with many failures and frustrations).

Today I still love painting flowers, but I also love the paint itself. I love playing with color and experimenting to see what happens if I add this color with that color. Studying my subject and mixing the colors to match is one of my greatest joys. The scraps of paper I use to test my color mixes aren't what anyone would call art, but I find them to be beautiful and never throw them away. Often I'll fill pages in my sketchbooks with color swatches just for the delight it brings me.

## Materials

I have learned which materials I prefer by working with them for years. Here I'm sharing my favorites. I do also share my thoughts about art supplies [on my blog](#), on [YouTube](#) and in my [Skillshare classes](#).

### Paint

- Watercolor comes in tubes, pans and liquid form. Gouache is an opaque type of watercolor.
- I prefer to use pan watercolor paints and use three brands of artist grade paints: Winsor & Newton, Sennelier and Yarka St. Petersburg.
- You can purchase paint colors singly or in sets. I found that the Yarka St. Petersburg watercolor sets are very affordable (and less expensive than purchasing their colors separately).
- 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. The one down side is that when applied heavily the paint can dry shiny.
- There are many, many other options in a vast spectrum of price options. Use what you have or feel most comfortable using.

### Basic Colors

Although it's wonderfully fun to have a gorgeous set of colors you really only need a few to get started: red, yellow, blue (some suggested starter colors: Madder Lake Red, Cadmium Yellow and Ultramarine). For a warmer red choose a color like Cadmium Red. Cadmium Light Yellow is a nice warmer yellow.

Cinereous Blue or Cobalt Turquoise are good choices for a more turquoise-hued blue. (Note: Cobalt Turquoise doesn't always want to stay mixed when combined with other colors which is something I love about working with it).

### Additional Colors

Pinks: Opera Rose, Rose, Quinocridone Rose, Cobalt Violet



Greens: Russian Green, Phtalo Green Light

Black – although you can mix blacks, I find it takes a lot of paint and a lot of mixing. Lamp Black is nice on its own or mixed with other colors to deepen them.



White – in watercolor painting the paper is your white, but white paint is nice for giving other colors a pale, milky opacity. I like using it for silvery leaves like that of lambs' ears or sage and for mixing with tan colors when painting the papery outer layer of iris or daffodil buds.

### **Watercolor paper**

In my general art practice I use many different brands of both hot and cold press paper. For your own art you can use whatever you have on hand. As you try more and more papers you'll find yourself developing your own preferences. Keep in mind that the cheaper, less heavy papers won't react as well with water and paint than the more expensive, heavier papers. That being said, I've used some expensive papers that I don't like and some cheaper papers that I do. Some brands I like: Arches, Canson Heritage, Blick Premier.

### **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 used heavy plastic plates for mixing gouache (white ceramic plates from thrift stores are another nice option).

## 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! Be sure to choose brushes designed for use with watercolor. 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 other types of paint 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 let them dry flat before storing. I've found that plain water is enough to clean watercolor. Be gentle!

### Other supplies:

- Water jar
- Paper towels

## Sketchbooks

Sketchbooks are another option and so versatile. But 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. For 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 use 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!

## *Color Meditation*

The tutorial I did as part of the summit demonstrates my practice of studying my subject, observing the colors and capturing those colors with paint. This practice is truly a meditation for me. I am fully present. I am connected to my subject, to color, to paint. Some people can get very scientific about color mixing, paying close attention to the color wheel and the properties of optics that make color possible. I am not one of those people! I work in an intuitive way. I am curious. I experiment. I play. This is such a joy for me and I hope it will be a joy for you. If you want to learn more and see demonstrations of these techniques you can take my Skillshare class [Learn to Fearlessly Mix and Use Color for Watercolor Painting](#).

## *Easy ways to start playing with color:*

**Swatching** – take some time to get to know the paints you have. First simply paint a swatch of each color. Paint squares, circles, rectangles, uneven splotches... whatever shape you're moved to create. Paint very concentrated swatches and then play with desaturating each color. Challenge yourself to see how many different versions (dark to light) of each color you can create, either by painting a gradient or separate small swatches of color.





**Mixing and swatching** – Choose two primary colors (blue, red, yellow) to start with. Make a well of one color on your palette and paint a swatch of that color on your paper.



Note: the more water that is in your mix, the paler your color will be. Letting your mixed paint dry on the palette and then coming back to use it will give you a more intense (saturated) color than if you were to use it wet. When painting my botanicals I always prefer to let my color mixes dry before I start painting.

Add a tiny bit of the second color to the first, mix and paint a swatch. Continue adding more of the second color and swatching your resulting mixes until the color you end up with is nearly the same as the second color. (Note: if your second color is yellow, you will never reach a pure yellow color mixing this way).

After you've experimented with two colors you can choose two different colors to do the same process of mixing and swatching.



After you've tried all of the basic color combinations try adding a third color. A mix of three primary colors – red, yellow and blue – will give you an almost limitless spectrum of colors. Mixing red, yellow and blue will give you browns and greys, but you'll also get deep greens, plums, rusts and many, many colors in-between.



Take this experimentation slowly and challenge yourself to see how many different colors you can create! This is something you can do again and again and getting to know how colors work together will be invaluable when you go to mix a specific color.

All of your swatching experiments can be a great way to create color guides for yourself.

## *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 out inspiration.** 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.
- Try choosing books or other inspirations in a subject that you normally would not be interested in. You might be surprised how many ideas it sparks.
- 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 art play. Determine the best time of day for you and set aside time to work then.

- Making art daily is ideal, but maybe that won't work for your schedule. Decide how many times a week you want to work on art-making and which days of the week are best for you. Then plan time to do it.
- Set realistic goals and don't put too much pressure on yourself to perform.
- It can be helpful to date your sketchbook pages and other work. 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 small bites is an easy, low pressure way to make sure you're creating every day.
- Listen to something while you're working. 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 an art practice into your days.
- To share or not to share? Sharing what you create (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! Art making can certainly be work, but it can (and should) also be enjoyable. It's the act of regularly creating 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. I certainly have. 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 and collections of inspiring imagery.

### **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. If you only ever use one medium, try another. 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 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 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.



Create an art practice for yourself that fits you and your life. It can be small. It can be private. Each piece you make can be a springboard into other projects. It can be a meditation. It can be a pep talk. It can be a celebration. It can be a collaboration. It can be *whatever you want it to be*.

Now go. Make something.

## 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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