

TEACHERS: RESOURCES AND DEMONSTRATIONS

Painting a Still Life Composition

Introduction

Hi my name is Nathalie Mantha, I work for the National Gallery of Canada. Today we will be talking about how acrylic techniques can be used to create a Still-life painting.

Acrylic painting is a very versatile medium. You can use acrylics in many ways and they are water-soluble medium, which makes it easy for clean up. No need to use solvents. Water will do. When selecting tubes of paint, you should probably select the non-toxic variety for your classroom.

Here, we see a limited palette of colours. You can purchase a wide range of pre-mixed colours in art supplies stores. It is not always necessary to have an extensive variety of colours, since you can make interesting colour combinations with only a few tubes of paint.

Various mediums can be used with acrylics. A medium is a product you add to your paint to enhance its flow or to create specific effects. We will be demonstrating the properties of both a liquid medium and a gel medium that has the consistency of paste. With these mediums, I will apply glazes and create impastos.

Presentation of art materials

Here are the paintbrushes that you can use with acrylics. We have square brushes of various sizes. These brushes will create different marks on the canvas. We will also be using round brushes and a fan brush, for texture.

The hog's hair paintbrushes, with their stiff bristles, effectively push the paint and create thick layers on the canvas. We have synthetic brushes, with softer bristles that I will use for glazes. These brushes provide a smoother finish. I have a palette knife to mix my colours or to use as a painting tool to create impasto areas.

Here are the different supports that can be used for painting. In the demonstration, I will use a stretched canvas, like this one. The canvas has been stretched over the wooden frame. You can also paint on masonite or canvas board. These can be more economical options. Paper, such as watercolour paper, primed or unprimed, also works well as a support.

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I will be using a disposable palette. I prefer a white surface, which enables me to see my colour, mixes more easily, but alternatively, you could use a masonite board covered with wax paper or even an old plate.

Here's my palette. We have the 3 primaries--- a cool and a warm option of each. We also have 2 earth tones, a green and a white that will help me create all the colours I need for my painting.

Viewfinder, paint combinations and under-painting

I am using a viewfinder, which is a small cardboard frame that I made to help me define and select my composition. I look at the still life through this frame until I find an interesting view and a way of organizing my shapes on the canvas.

I am now mixing a pale and fluid colour that I will use to sketch my subject on the canvas. I will use the edge of a large square paintbrush to create linear brushstrokes.

You can see that I am sketching in with paint the basic shapes and placement of the elements of my still life. I work on the overall composition because I want to fill the frame. It is so easy to make the subject small on a large canvas. It's much more dynamic if the space is filled and the positive and negative spaces play against each other.

The paint that I use is very light in colour and translucent. Later, it will be easier to make changes and rework certain shapes without being disturbed by my initial brushstrokes.

When you paint, do not be afraid to use your brush freely. Acrylics are so versatile. There's always a way of adding layers of paint to correct areas that didn't work out.

With my paintbrush, I rework some areas.

You can experiment with paint mixing and create very dynamic colours and hues. It's important not to use the paint straight from the tube. Be creative, and have fun mixing your colours together. It is easier to create an overall unity with a limited paint palette. Right now I am mixing a grey by adding some blue and some white to an earth tone.

Now I am filling in my shapes and working on the background using a large brush. I will define the elements of my painting, working with the shapes created by my paintbrush. We are working with dabs and strokes of paints, not with lines.

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Now I am working up the whole canvas. I use my paintbrush to paint the essential shapes to capture the essence of my subject. I don't work on details yet or limiting myself to certain areas. I work on the overall composition of my painting. I want to capture my subject in its entirety.

Adding details, highlights and refinements

Now that I have painted my main shapes and that they are where I want them to be, I will start adding some details. I will now start working on some specific elements. I want to see the brushstrokes, the shapes and values and not simply lines and contours.

Each paintbrush that I use will leave a different kind of mark on the canvas, which is why it is important to use a variety of brushes. As you can see, with the paintbrush I am using right now, I can make strokes that resemble lines when I use it on its side or I can apply dabs of paint when I use it flat.

Again, it is essential to play with colours and explore all the possibility of paint mixing. For example, to tone down this red, I will mix in green----the complementary colour and a little white.

I never use pre-mixed black paint---- from a tube. It's very easy to create darker values by mixing the complementary colours. If you mix red and green, or blue and orange, or purple and yellow, you will get a wide range of dark colours. These colours will have a depth unlike the blacks that you would get from a tube.

Creating volumes and Impasto

What I am doing right now is creating volume to this flower by adding darker values of paint where the shadows are. I leave the brushstrokes apparent. I can also mix the wet paint directly onto the canvas. Working with layers of thick paints is a technique called impasto.

I am now lightening my background. I use different brushstrokes in different directions to create interesting effects, in order to avoid brushstrokes going in the same directions.

I am now mixing glazes that I will apply to various sections of my paintings.

To render the effect of the transparent vase, I will apply a glaze – essentially a transparent paint that I made by mixing a gel or liquid medium with my colours. When I apply this type of paint, I can see the other layers of paint underneath.

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Mixing glazes and other light effects

I will take this time to create some light effects. I apply the paint freely. It is important to capture the essence of your subject and not to create an exact copy.

I am mixing a warm white by taking my titanium white and adding some lemon yellow and an earth tone. I will use this mixture to create the impressions of light. I am using the same paint on the vase. I will paint this leaf using a thicker paint. I mix the paints directly onto the canvas.

Clean up

Now that the painting session is over, it is essential to clean the art materials very well. The paintbrushes have become saturated with paint. Usually I clean them under running water.

Here I am using a small bucket of water. After rinsing the brushes, I place a small amount of soap in the palm of my hand and I remove the remaining acrylic paint. It is so important to fully clean your brushes since the acrylics will dry and harden. It is almost impossible to save a brush that hasn't been properly cleaned.

Conclusion

Acrylics dry really quickly on the palette. If I wanted to keep some of this paint wet for a few days I could simply place the palette with a wet sponge into a sealed container, like a Tupperware container. Today I used a disposable palette and since I will not keep this paint for another session, I can tear off the first layer of paper and throw it away --a very quick clean up.

This was a short still life painting demonstration using acrylic techniques. Obviously you could bring it along further, add details, but most of all make it fun and enjoy mixing colour.