

# Chapter 1

## So You Want to Paint

### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Examining the history of oil painting and why it has endured for 500 years
- ▶ Discovering what it's like to paint with oils
- ▶ Finding the materials and space you need to start painting
- ▶ Developing your skills for a lifelong interest in painting

**T**here you are, standing in front of a painting in a museum or gallery or art fair, and you have the desire to create a work of art. You may have had this feeling for quite some time but you don't know where to start. Or maybe you've had lessons or a class in the past and it just didn't work out. We know that for many people, learning how to paint is a lifelong goal. And we firmly believe in your ability to reach that goal.

To make a painting or other work of art is to become a part of the cultural expression of your society. It is to create something personal, something of beauty or significance that is your vision alone. We also know that for many people, learning to make art is the best way to gain a true appreciation for the arts. During this process you learn not only to paint but also to see the world around you with an acute sense of perception. You grow to understand the working process of painting and are able to see its evidence right on the surface of a canvas.

If you've decided to learn to paint and you don't know where to begin, we can help. In this initial chapter, we give you an overview of this book and walk you through the process of learning to paint, step by step. We try to make the process understandable, painless, and fun. Collectively, we have more years of experience than we care to admit, and we know that with patience, we can open up this world to you. We're unabashed promoters for learning to make art and we're very excited to have this opportunity to work with you in this process. Take a few minutes to look over this chapter before you go running off to the art supply store. And get ready for an enjoyable experience.

### *What It's Like to Paint with Oils*

Oil paint is made up of *pigment*, the stuff that gives the paint its color, and *oil*, which allows it to flow off the brush well and to dry in a slow and measured way. The oil in the paint is usually linseed oil, which dries slowly, but it does

dry (unlike mineral oils, which never thoroughly dry). Oil paint dries through chemical action, as opposed to the process of evaporation in water-based liquids. You need to understand this process in order to utilize all the properties of the oil paint to their best advantage.

The great thing about oil paint is that it's creamy and dries slowly so that you have time to paint an image. You can experiment with brushstrokes, blending new colors, and expressing yourself with a wonderful art medium.



Please be aware that oil paint does have an odor. The smell of oil paint isn't acrid; it's more of a nutty scent. After you've been painting for a while and you set up your own studio, the smell of linseed oil when you open the door to your studio in the morning can be very welcoming, but some people can have an allergic reaction or otherwise find it undesirable.

If you suspect that you may have a negative reaction, purchase a tube of inexpensive color and test it. Find an inexpensive color, such as yellow ochre, and take it home. Open the tube, squeeze a dime-sized pool of paint onto a paper plate, and leave it nearby while you watch TV or do another quiet activity. If your eyes become irritated and you wear contacts, try not wearing them while you try the oil paint and be sure to have ventilation in your work area. Some people have a reaction on their skin from the paint; if this is the case, you can use latex gloves.

Also be sure to test the solvent used with oil paint. Purchase a bottle of Gamsol and put it to the same test. If the smell of the solvent is the problem, you can try water-mixable paints such as Max oil paints made by Grumbacker (there are other brands as well). If the oil paint itself bothers you, you may want to try a water-based acrylic paint instead.

## *Gathering Your Materials*

You need to know a few things about oil paints before you buy your paints and supplies, so be sure to familiarize yourself with their general characteristics before firing up your charge card. In this book, we get you started with standard oil paints, but as you shop, you run into odd versions of oil paints, such as the fast-drying alkyd paints or water-mixable oil paints. When you have more experience, experiment with these kinds of oils, but for now, stick with the more-traditional materials.

Some major brands are Daler-Rowney Georgian, Gamblin's Sketching Oils, Winsor Newton's Winton series, Grumbacker's Academy colors, and Shiva. These brands are all student grade or inexpensive colors and are perfect for the projects in this book. The paints we use in this book are a mix of these manufacturers. Purchase tubes based on price, available colors, and the sizes of the tubes available. The exact list of colors that you need is in Chapter 3.

In addition to the paints themselves, you need other equipment and supplies. Here's a quick overview:

- ✓ Solvent (use Turpenoid or Gamsol)
- ✓ Brushes
- ✓ A palette and palette knife
- ✓ Canvases to paint on
- ✓ An easel or something to support your painting while you work

Other useful items include a paint box for storing and carrying your supplies, jars for your solvent, and special easels for outdoor painting. A complete starter list of colors and all supplies is discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

## *Finding a Space to Paint*

An important factor that you need to consider is where exactly you're going to get your painting done. Here's what we advise:

- ✓ You need a space that's approximately 8 x 8 feet. This minimal space does well for the small painting projects that we lead you through in this book.
- ✓ Be sure to have good lighting, cleanable floor surfaces, and tabletops (in case of spills).

If you're working in a room with carpet, a plastic mat designed for home offices works very well. Many artists get started by creating a studio in a garage, a screened-in porch, or a utility room. A table, chair, and some inexpensive clamp lights or lamps can nicely transform a basement room into your own studio.



## *Safety issues*

The first thing we want to stress is that oil paint is an art material for adults, *not children*.

Oil paints are quite safe to use, but you must be able to take safety seriously in order to have an enjoyable experience and protect your health. You need to be aware of two areas of concern: air quality and exposure to the skin.

Some oil paints contain toxic elements that your skin can absorb, so you must handle them with safety in mind. Wearing disposable latex gloves is always a good idea. If you're allergic to latex, try some of the similar alternatives or barrier cream. You can obtain appropriate gloves at any hardware store.

Ventilation is the first thing to consider for the area that you're going to work in. If you have windows that open and a fan to move the air out of your studio area and living space, you can work comfortably. Paying attention to good ventilation means that you aren't exposing yourself and your family to annoying and potentially harmful odors from solvent vapors. You can also limit your exposure if you habitually work with low-odor solvents like Turpenoid and Gamsol.

To avoid fire hazards and protect the environment, properly handle and dispose of solvents and solvent-soaked rags. You have many options for the safe use and disposal of your discarded art materials. Call your local fire department for specific instructions for your area to find out how to safely dispose of solvents and other hazardous wastes. For more tips and ways you can recycle your materials, refer to Chapter 3.

Also remember to maintain good studio habits. Cleaning up as you go, keeping the paint off your skin, refraining from eating while you paint, and painting with your brushes — not your fingers — makes oil painting a safe pursuit for you.

## *Painting in shared spaces*

If you have children in the area where you paint, take precautions to make sure that the materials are safely used and put away when you're not there.



We can't stress enough that good ventilation is critical — especially if children are around. Be sure that you're using low-odor solvents and keep the air moving *out* of the room. Solvent vapors are heavier than the air in a room, so they fall toward the floor. Children playing on the floor are therefore exposed to the vapors more than you are.

Children love to paint too, so avoid tempting them by storing your paints and supplies in locked cabinets above their reach, just as you would your kitchen and bathroom cleaners. Store wet canvases well above their reach as well. If they're old enough, distract them with a supply of age-appropriate art materials of their own.

Oil paints can also be a danger to pets. Set up a system to put your materials and your wet paintings out of reach.



If good ventilation isn't possible, you don't have to give up on the idea of oil painting. You can find several lines of high-quality water-mixable oils that have nearly all the qualities of standard oil paints. Many artists who can't tolerate working with standard oils and solvents use them with great results. You can follow all the lessons in this book with water-mixable oils.



Keep all oil paint materials out of the way of anyone or anything that may be harmed by touching, tasting, or smelling them. Be sure to handle and dispose of solvents and used rags safely to avoid fire hazards and to protect the environment. Oil painting is safe as long as you're aware of how to properly handle and care for your materials and paintings.

## *Starting Your Painting Adventure*

To get started, you need to find an art materials supplier. If you live in a city, paints and other materials are likely available from many suppliers in your area, and you may be lucky enough to have a couple of well-stocked art supply stores that cater to the specific needs of artists. Not every town is big

enough to support an art supply store, though, but hobby shops, craft and fabric stores, and even “big box” discount stores often carry a selection of oil painting materials.

You can find good sources for materials online as well, and sometimes the discounts are very good. Many of these suppliers had well-known, mail-order businesses before going online and carry a vast selection of art materials. Checking out these suppliers is worth your while, even if you don’t like to buy online, because they often provide information to help you make your selection of materials.

Of course, in terms of helpful guidance, nothing beats a local art supply store that’s owned or staffed by artists. A face-to-face discussion with a live human being can be well worth the slightly higher price.



Shop around. Online prices can be very seductive, so be sure to factor in the shipping charges as you compare online prices with those of your local sources.

We encourage you to explore different options for suppliers, but we advise you to stick to the materials list in Chapter 3 to make sure that you get the right supplies. We price out the basic set of materials that you need to get started at \$90 to \$100. This initial investment sets you up with the materials that you need for a long time. For the first few months, canvas should be the only material that you use up. You may have to purchase another tube of paint from time to time, but for the most part, the materials should last quite some time.

Chapter 3 outlines how to save money on your supplies, but you want to be sure to get good-quality materials to make your artistic work enjoyable. Poor-quality paints and brushes cause frustration and disappointing results.

## *Getting yourself organized to paint*

Consider how much time, space, and funds you need to get started and what you’re willing to commit to this endeavor. You can skimp on space and money, but to improve, you need to make a consistent investment of time.

We suggest that you set aside two to three hours a week for a period of eight to ten weeks in order to get a good start. That allows you to move smoothly through the painting projects in this book, have enough time to enjoy the work that you do, and develop some solid skills.

You need space to paint as well; we outline that info earlier in this chapter so that you can consider your options. Also read over the section in Chapter 6 on setting up your workspace to paint.

The initial cash investment can be expensive. The budget that we suggest for a solid supply list can give you a lot of flexibility, but don’t let lack of money discourage you from painting. Remember that you can build your set of paints in stages by buying only what you need for each set of assignments. There’s no harm in spending a few months making black and white paintings. You can call it your Gray Period!

Another important organizational skill is to take good care of your equipment and supplies. Put the lids back on your tubes, clean your brushes and other tools, and tidy your area to save time and money for your hobby.

## *Understanding the painting process*

Before you begin painting, spend a bit of time looking over the basics of the painting process. You'll be working in a manner that artists refer to as *general to specific*. This means that you lay out the basic shapes and colors of the overall image before diving into the details. Painting in layers is one of the main attributes of oil painting. The how-to section that covers applying paint to canvas is good to read as well (see Chapter 6). And finally, proper cleanup and storage of your equipment means that you can get started again quickly and your materials will last a long time.

### *Developing the discipline to enhance your skills*

Many people believe that artistic ability is based solely on talent — an inherent quality that you're born with. This isn't the case. Some people do have a keen interest in art that leads them to naturally devote time to developing their skills even when they're quite young. But at any point in your life you can discover and choose to develop your artistic skill. Art is a discipline and requires practice in order to increase skills and develop understanding and the ability to express yourself artistically.

Some important parts of this process are having goals for what you want to achieve with your painting and working toward those goals in stages. Don't be discouraged by those lovely 30-minute paintings that you see on TV. That kind of painting is primarily about learning clever techniques — which you can also learn — but bringing out the true painter in you takes patience.

Tolerate being a rookie for a while. You'll enjoy the process and create some nice pieces if you can relax and take it step by step. Learning to paint is like learning a new language, sport, or how to cook; you have to start with the basics and then work up to the special techniques. In painting, simple subjects allow you to get used to the materials and build your skills so that you can go on to more-complex subjects. At any point in the learning process you can stop and repeat a project, using different colors or objects to work from. Practice is important for any artistic pursuit, and honing your skills allows you to successfully go on to more-demanding subjects, such as landscapes and people.

### *Setting aside time to paint*

As with any discipline, setting aside time to develop your skills is important. Decide how much time you can devote to your painting, and then make a schedule and stick to it. A two-hour session once or twice a week is good. This is your time — don't allow anything to interfere with your work. If you can't actually work on a painting, go to the library and check out some books on art or go to a gallery or museum.





Set realistic goals for your work. Your first painting may look a little simple, but remember to be patient. This book starts with simple paintings and works through to more-complex subjects. At every point, we outline how to evaluate each project or painting and how to gauge your progress. You must tolerate being a rookie. Pay attention to the basic goals for each project and you'll be rewarded.

## *Developing Painting Skills*

One common question is whether you need to learn to draw first. Drawing skills are useful for painting, but you don't have to have training in drawing before you start to paint. If you're self-taught in drawing and you think you can make a reasonable image of something, you can start painting. If you can draw something that you see from real life (as opposed to working from photos or other artwork) and other people can recognize what it is, you're fine. Throughout this book, we give you tips to help you with the drawing process while you're leaning to paint.

The process of beginning a painting is to sketch in the various parts in a wash first, and then apply paint to block in the major light and dark areas. The next step is to make refinements to the colors and shapes. You can see this process in the painting in Figure 1-1, which is a great example of an oil painting done in layers. You start with a thin layer and gradually use more paint, letting colors in the lower layers peek through.



**Figure 1-1:**  
A painting of  
an interior  
showing all  
the various  
stages of  
the painting  
process.

The following steps outline the basic process of painting with oils:

**1. Start with a simple sketch.**

Your initial marks on a canvas make up the drawing in a *wash*, a thin, fast-drying mixture of paint and solvent that's easy to correct. During this stage of the painting, you can make changes to your drawing of the individual objects very easily. Each change in your sketch goes over the last until you have the proper sizes and placement of all elements on your canvas. Don't ever try to erase or to clean marks off with solvent; it only makes a mess. Just wait until it dries a bit and paint over the area.

**2. Plan your design.**

After you sketch the image on the canvas with your wash, you can see the overall effect and predict how the painting will turn out. This all happens in the first 20 to 30 minutes of the painting. Our painting projects lead you through the assessment of your efforts and guide you on how to tell whether you have a good, solid design for your painting. At this early stage you can still make changes in the layout of the image and improve the overall design of the elements.

**3. Apply the major colors.**

After you have a good drawing and a solid design, you can start to block in the major colors. Apply the appropriate color to each form on your painting while making adjustments to the forms as you go. As you apply the color to each form on your canvas, it takes on a more fleshed out and substantial appearance. You also apply these colors in a thin mixture of paint and solvent.

**4. Work in layers.**

At this point you have the basic colors — the lights and darks — blocked in. Start to apply a heavier layer of paint to each of the forms. This layer may be exactly the same color as the first layer, or you may make subtle adjustments to the color, allowing the differences to peek through and add complexity to your painting. The painting process is fun and relaxing as you develop your painting layer by layer. We walk you through this process in detail in the first painting projects. In later projects, we introduce ways to make these layers work for you to create beautiful effects.