

## Chapter 1

# Acrylics Are Awesome!

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Discovering the wonders of acrylic painting
  - ▶ Uncovering your artistic instincts
  - ▶ Jumping right in to get painting
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**H**ave you ever thought, “I could paint like that” (or, “I wish I could paint like that”) as you walked through an art show? If so, you’ve expressed a desire to delve into the arts — even if only by looking at this book. There’s a romantic view of artists as paint-covered, canvas-focused geniuses drawing inspiration from some beautiful muse. And why not? Often that’s exactly what an artist is doing.

In this chapter, I show you a few of the reasons acrylics are amazing as well as explore what subject types make interesting paintings. You discover how to develop your talent and style and collect the images that interest you. Finally, you even personalize a sketchbook in order to get familiar with your acrylic paint (and then give you a place to collect sketches for painting ideas).

## *What’s So Awesome About Acrylic Paint?*

Have you walked into a well-stocked art supply store recently? It’s very exciting, but it can also be a bit overwhelming to see all your choices. You’re bombarded with watercolor, tempera, oil, water-soluble oil, heat set oil, casein, gouache, inks . . . and acrylic paints.

Acrylic paint is a perfect choice for beginners and experts alike. Why? You can apply it in layers, which means you can make changes easily. It dries fast, so you don’t have to wait long between layers. Cleanup is easy — just soap and water; the lack of harsh, smelly solvents means acrylic paint is better for your health than oil. Acrylics adhere to most everything (and when they don’t, you can get special products to help fix that), so you can paint on a traditional canvas or a decorative box. They can be used straight from the tube or bottle, but you can also add mediums, gels, and pastes that can change the paint’s thickness or finish to make it do just what you want it to do. For safe, easy, flexible, permanent, versatile painting, acrylic paint is a fantastic choice.

The following sections give you more information on just what is so great about acrylic paints.

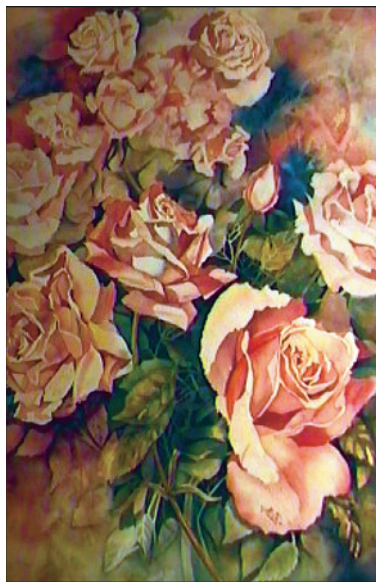
## *Versatility*

Acrylic paint is versatile. You can thin it with water to make it resemble watercolor (see Chapter 10 for more on mimicking watercolor painting with acrylic paint). You can also paint it on thick to give the impression of an oil painting (see Chapter 11 for that). You can paint it on many surfaces; it works fine with watercolor paper, canvas, and wood, among other things.

Acrylic is such a master of disguise that it may be difficult to decipher what a finished artwork was painted with. It's all in the hands of the artist — you. The paint does whatever you ask of it.

Acrylic painting also creates quality works no matter how much time you choose to spend on a painting or what mood you're in. If you have time and want to paint detailed precise paintings, you can work slowly and carefully to do just that. If you want to achieve a looser look and simplify the detail, acrylic still looks great. Take a look at the two styles of paintings in Figure 1-1. I love to paint flowers. The two styles in that figure indicate what mood I was in (and the amount of time I spent) when I painted each painting. I painted the sweetheart roses by taking my time and paying close attention to detail. Notice the heart-shaped dewdrop on the lower petal. The wheelbarrow was a quicker, faster-flowing painting. When I stopped, I thought I hadn't finished it, but when I came back to it, I decided it didn't need any more. Acrylic paint will accommodate either style and amount of detail.

**Figure 1-1:**  
Two styles  
of painting:  
one is  
tight and  
realistic,  
one is loose  
and soft.



## *Fast drying time*

Acrylic dries quickly, so you don't spend a lot of time waiting for it to dry. That lets you paint layers much more quickly than you can with oil paint. You can even manipulate the drying time if necessary for a particular project. (In Chapter 3, I discuss attributes and additives of acrylic paint.)



Because acrylic does dry quickly, get into the habit of soaking acrylic paint-loaded brushes in water when not in use. If you leave wet paint in brushes to dry, they become useless.

## *Durable finish*

Acrylic is also *lightfast*, meaning it doesn't fade significantly over time. You don't want to sell your masterpiece for beaucoup bucks and then have it disappear before the client's eyes. Plus, acrylic's tough finish means you don't necessarily need to frame your finished acrylic artwork behind glass — even if it's a work on paper. If you varnish your finished acrylic masterpiece, you can frame it without a *mat* (a cardboard-like border) or glass. In fact, many viewers complain that glass creates a glare. Another bonus is that this easier framing is also less expensive framing because you don't have the extra expense of mat and glass. Chapter 4 discusses the final presentation of acrylic paintings.

## *Resistance to cracking*

Acrylic is *thermoplastic*. *Thermo* indicates “heat,” and *plastic* means “moveable.” Basically, acrylic paint becomes flexible when it gets warm. This flexibility is helpful compared to other kinds of paint because acrylic is less likely to crack when dry. However, with flexibility comes caution: Acrylic paint also runs the risk of becoming tacky when warm. So don't stack thick paintings face to face in a hot attic or garage because they may stick together. The good news is acrylics also become stiffer in cold environments. If your paintings become stuck, simply transfer them to a cool place (such as a basement) and wait for them to release.

# *Nurturing and Growing the Acrylic Artist in You*

Whether you want to be a full-time artist or just start a new hobby, acrylic painting is a perfect way to explore the world, fill some time, challenge your limits, focus your energy, impress friends and family, and learn to appreciate the beauty that's all around you.

## *Developing your own talents*

Have you ever heard the warning “You must have talent” and felt like that was an obstacle keeping you from even trying? Well, I'm here to tell you that that kind of talent is mythical, fictitious nonsense. Show me someone who can draw and paint and I will show you someone who has spent much time getting there. Talent doesn't fall from the sky onto your lap. I do give the good Lord credit, but talent is developed and nurtured here on Earth. When I started, I wasn't very good. But I wanted to be good badly enough that I continued to

hone the craft — practicing my skills — so I could eventually say, “I am an artist.” All you *do* need to succeed in art is aptitude and perseverance. You have to *want* to be an artist. The rest is practice, study, practice, reading, practice, observation, and practice. The good news? Practice is fun.

Nurture your aptitude (or talent, or whatever you want to call it) to develop it. Look at art books, art museums, and art shows every chance you get. Look for art that you like, and try to understand art that may not appeal to you at first. Study the old masters, and find living artists who can guide your own spirit. Don’t underestimate the importance of talking with like-minded individuals, because nonartists may not understand. If you can, find a mentor. Even the old masters apprenticed with a master artist of the time. The master imparted wisdom and inspiration to the next generation of artists to keep the arts flourishing.

## *Finding and capturing inspiration*

What inspires you? You may get jazzed by beautiful figures of other people, the perfection of nature, patterns, animals, or something especially meaningful to you. It may even be painting itself: I find that I’m inspired more by *how* a painting is done than by what it is. For example, a beautiful flow of colors describing a simple grass meadow may be truly inspiring. The subject of the grass meadow isn’t the exciting part; the brush work, color, and execution are what elevates the painting. The way that light and shadow fall on a subject often is the inspiration for artists. Look for what excites you when you see a subject suitable for painting. Start to collect the ideas for painting subjects.

You don’t need anything elaborate to get started. If you have a pencil and a little pocket notebook, you’re in business. Draw in that little notebook every day — whatever you see. Collect shapes. Look outside and collect trees, bushes, and anything else that catches your attention. When you get around to designing paintings, you can refer to your collection of shapes and arrange them into a painting. Chapter 6 has more tips on drawing.



Cameras are wonderful tools to collect painting ideas. I am never without my camera, just in case something pops up that’s photo-worthy. However, don’t replace drawing with using pictures. Nothing approaches the unique exploration that happens when you really look at an item and try to re-create it on paper. You spend more time seeing relationships between curves, angles, and parts of the object. You learn. You may have seen that item a million times, but until you try to draw it, you don’t realize that you’ve never really looked at it.

## **Art as stress relief**

More good news: Drawing and painting can make your stress disappear. A Zen-like feeling comes over you when you sit down and take time to observe and recreate. When I prepare to paint, I gather my materials, get out my canvas, get the lights right, and put the kettle on for some tea. I am

preparing my mind for what is coming next. It’s almost like yoga. If you can turn off the phone, maybe put on some music (preferably instrumental), and control any other interruptions, drawing and painting are perfect ways to relieve stress.

## *Getting in the zone*

I recommend instrumental music as a background soundtrack for your painting session. Why listen to music without words? It's all about using your right and left brain to their full advantage. Not to get all scientific on you — this is an art book, for crying out loud — but studies do show that the left hemisphere of the brain controls analytical functions (speech, numbers, time, organization, and so on) and the right hemisphere houses the creative functions (spatial relationships, colors, problem solving, and so on). Instrumental music stimulates your creative right brain without awakening your speech-controlling left brain with lyrics. Of course, you're not really only using half of your brain when you're drawing or painting (although I'm sure you know many half-brained people), but you do get "in the zone." Have you ever been traveling and realized that time has flown by and you don't remember how you got to your destination? The same thing often happens while doing a creative project — you're so busy doing right-brain work that left-brain time considerations fall by the wayside.



You want to be in this spirit when you paint — so avoid the things that stimulate the left brain, like conversations, talk radio, and listening to music with lyrics. Instead, try some Mozart.

## *Finding your style while expanding your horizons*

You'll probably go through many stages in your art career. The first stage may just be to get something recognizable down in a painting. Can the viewing public decipher what animal your wildlife painting depicts? Later, when it's obvious that what you've drawn is, say, a hippopotamus, you may become very interested in the way the light and shadow fall on the animal, and then in getting just the right color combination, and then in being able to sum up the hippo in the fewest possible lines, and so on. You can derive an endless amount of inspiration from your artistic progression.

How do you make this progression? Be curious. Experiment. You must be interested in the world. Collect images of subjects that are intriguing to you. Find out as much as you can about them and then explore them in your artwork. Perhaps you're interested in fantasy or science fiction. Or flea markets. Or train travel. Or basketball, fishing, musical instruments, beekeeping, or upholstery. Art is there for you, too, if you look for it. I've expanded my interests lately to racing cars and birdwatching. That's pretty diverse, but I find that both interest areas provide plenty of painting topics. For example, Figure 1-2 is a car painting; for added interest, I've painted a close-up for a slightly unexpected view. You can make any interest of yours come to life through art. You can own any vehicle, building, landscape, or zoo animal. You can make the world as you want it to be. What power!



**Figure 1-2:**  
This car painting presents an interesting angle on an everyday subject.

*Genre* is a term used in painting to refer to different kinds of paintings. Here are some of the most popular genres:

- ✓ **Landscape:** *Landscapes* (which portray earth elements such as trees, skies, grass, and mountains) may be the most popular genre. Figure 1-3 shows a typical landscape painting, and Chapter 10 lets you try your own hand at landscape.
- ✓ **Still life:** *Still lifes* are composed of arranged elements such as pots, fabric, fruit, flowers, and knick-knacks, usually positioned on a table. You can paint still lifes in Chapters 6 and 11.
- ✓ **Portrait:** *Portraits* re-create faces and identifiable images. A portrait of a house is a real, specific house.
- ✓ **Wildlife:** Wildlife paintings portray domestic and wild animals, birds, and fish. Chapter 4 gives you a wildlife project.
- ✓ **Abstract:** *Abstract* is another name for nonrepresentational art. Chapter 12 is all about abstract art.

## What's *my* style?!

*Style* is a word that gets tossed around a lot. Some styles are loose, like many of the Impressionists. Some styles are tight, like the Super Realists. Don't worry about developing a style right away. It's important to try as wide a variety of techniques as possible to begin with so

you can tell what you like and what you don't. Your style will follow — you don't want to force it. With patience, your style will evolve, and one day you'll notice that your paintings look similar — because they all have your style.



**Figure 1-3:**  
Living in Colorado provides subject matter for a beautiful landscape everywhere you look.

- ✔ **Collage:** A *collage* attaches papers, paints, photographs, and other similar items in layers to create unique effects. Chapter 13 discusses and walks you through collage projects.
- ✔ **Mixed media:** A mixed media work blends different paints and drawing materials together in one work.

I talk about all of these acrylic painting genres in this book (especially in Chapter 15), and you can find step-by-step projects for most of them. The projects here are just to give you a taste — an idea for you to take and run with using your own imagination. When you try your hand at the projects in this book, think about how you can apply those techniques to what interests you.

You may try all the projects in this book and find that you excel at one of them more than the others. That may become your specialty. Many artists focus on just one particular genre, developing a style and reputation for painting just that kind of thing. Such specialization is often good strategy; in fact, most gallery owners prefer artists who are recognizable for a specialty. Say you dig aliens in purple spaceships. If that's all you paint, you'll become so good at that niche that when people see an alien in a purple spaceship at a gallery, they'll recognize it as yours.

## Project: Painting Your Sketchbook

The rest of this fine book contains lots of details about everything having to do with acrylics, but I know you're anxious to get started. So why not jump right in and try out some paint? For now, just get some acrylic paint, a can of water, a paintbrush, and a sketchbook with a stiff cover. I like sketchbooks with heavy, unfinished cardboard covers. The size is your choice; I found a 6-inch square book that I liked. I also usually choose a sketchbook with a spiral binding because it lies flat when opened.

Earlier in this chapter, I suggest that you collect ideas and put them in a sketchbook. When you're done with this project, you'll *want* to sketch in your new acrylic-embellished sketchbook. By painting a plain, inexpensive spiral sketchbook, you'll want to pick it up, show it off, and — most importantly — fill it up.

Choose a few acrylic colors you like — three should be plenty. I used three colors in this example: Iridescent Bright Gold, Quinacridone Nickel Azo Gold, and Iridescent Copper (fluid acrylics by Golden) — plus a Titanium White from a tube. I used a 1-inch flat brush; if you feel like making some lines or details, you may want a #8 round brush. (Chapter 2 gives you the skinny on brushes). Fill your water container (a recycled tin can is fine) and have some paper towels handy for spills.

If you want to embellish your cover further, you need a few other items: acrylic gloss medium (Chapter 3 describes mediums in detail) and some pretty scrap papers, such as tissue or decorative papers. Sometimes you can even recycle the interior of envelopes. Did you ever notice the nifty patterns inside junk mail envelopes? If you're on a budget, these scraps work fine.



You *can't* do this project wrong. No pressure. You're not even painting from a palette. All you want to do is get a feeling for the paint and get started enjoying the possibilities. Just follow these steps to your own inspirational painted sketchbook:

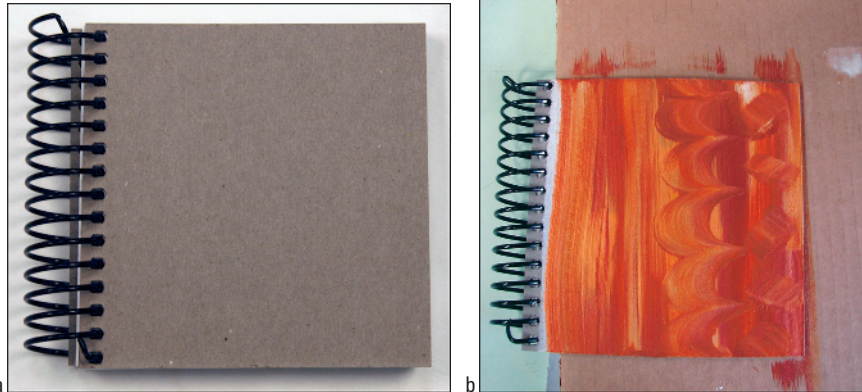
- 1. Prepare your painting area by covering your painting area in newspaper and corralling your supplies.**  
Place your sketchbook on the newspaper. I also put another sheet of newspaper between the sketchbook cover and the sketchbook pages to protect the pages from paint.
- 2. Squeeze a dollop of white paint directly on the cover and spread it to create an even coat.**
- 3. If you're using multiple colors, squirt them onto the cover while the white paint is still wet and pull the brush through it to create a marbled look.**

I pulled the brush through the paint only a couple of times because I wanted the variety of colors to remain unblended, but you can play with the paint as much as you like. Use the brush to make textures, marks, and lines. I completely covered the surface with the brush strokes all going the same direction, and then made a scalloped line by pulling the brush through the smooth paint.

When you like the result or the paint begins to dry, stop. Figure 1-4a shows the plain sketchbook and Figure 1-4b includes an added coat of paint.



**Figure 1-4:**  
The  
sketchbook  
before (a)  
and after (b)  
a coat of  
paint.



- 4. Let the cover dry completely, keeping your brush in the water while you're not using it.**

You may speed up the process with a blow dryer or let it dry naturally for an hour or so.

- 5. Stop there if you want, or embellish by going on to Steps 6 through 9.**
- 6. Embellish by painting a Chinese character (or whatever you feel like).**

Use a round brush to make marks that resemble a Chinese character. Push down to make a wide stroke or pull the brush to make a line, lifting the brush as you pull to reduce the width of the line.

Practice your characters on another sheet of paper until you're confident enough to do them for real on the cover. If you don't like your first cover attempt, wipe it off with a damp paper towel and try again. You can also make the character less prominent by covering it with paper (Step 7) in part or entirely.

Rub-on letters are available at the craft store. Figure 1-5 shows rub-ons by American Traditional Design. You can rub these onto a surface and paint over the top of them to get an accurate character.

- 7. To embellish with papers, paint acrylic medium over the area you want to paper, add the paper, and then paint another layer of medium.**

Gather some paper scraps. I tore some Japanese rice papers into strips and rectangles. Try using paper with images or graphics; I added a reproduction of *Mona Lisa* as a final indication of what will go inside the book. You can also sprinkle glitter at this time. I put big metallic pieces on called Gildenglitz by USArtQuest.

- 8. Let everything dry.**
- 9. Repeat Step 3 to paint the inside cover.**

The cardboard cover may bow a little from the moisture. By painting the inside, the fibers of the cardboard bend back and lie flatter.



**Figure 1-5:** Use rub-ons as a guide to creating accurate characters.



Figure 1-6 shows a couple of embellished books. The *Mona Lisa* is a blank sketchbook, and the larger one is a self-bound date book using a vinyl cover painted with Chinese characters and embellished with Japanese papers. What a way to go around the world with art: Italian paintings, Chinese words, and Japanese paper with an American assemblage. (And if you liked this project, you definitely want to check out Chapter 13 on collage.)



**Figure 1-6:** Transform a plain sketchbook into a work of art using acrylic paint.



Don't forget to clean your brushes with soap and water when you're done. You don't want to have to throw your brushes away after your first project!