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Interview with Watercolor Artist Jeanne Dobie

Submitted by: Kelly Powers

Art is a choice and no one represents that truth more so than watercolorist Jeanne Dobie. Yes, Dobie was encouraged as a child, but learning to paint doesn't come with the sweep of a magic wand. Dobie set painting challenges for herself and set her sights high. She changed her approach so that she could still create art (and improve at her art) while raising her five children. Don't have time this weekend to paint? Get inspired to find time with Jeanne Dobie.

You are known for your wonderful color, how did you learn your approach?

Color has always come naturally with me. As a child, I passed up crayons in favor of painting my coloring books with watercolor washes, wet pages after wet pages. I loved to mix colors to see what new colors would appear. I'm told that I

even tried to mix white!

Years later when I exhibited my first painting in the American Watercolor Society Exhibition, Barse Miller, a National Academician, saw it and invited me as one of twelve artists selected from around the country to attend his Master Class in Maine. Barse passed along his ideas of organizing colors into three categories according to paint qualities. I would name Barse as my greatest teacher who inspired me to pursue color in my own directions.

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Tidepools, Watercolor, Jeanne Dobie

As I taught workshops around the country however, I noticed that students were overly concerned with staying within a triad when they should be freely thinking about creating. So I developed my "Pure Pigment Palette" described in my book "Making Color Sing", which is an excellent way to teach clean color that makes it almost impossible to produce muddy colors. In addition, I was conducting my "Paint-escapes" to Europe and needed a simple palette, yet one that could mix and capture the unique colors of different regions, such as the delicate atmosphere of the Algarve, Portugal, and the rich stain-glass colors of the Scandinavian fjords, and places in between. The Pure Pigment Palette did it all.

Knowing what you know now, if a student came to you and wanted to focus her energy on becoming

really good at color, how would you suggest she proceed? At what point in the learning process should an artist really start to focus on color?

Personalize your color. Too many artists want a secret formula. The secret is to mix, mix, mix. Every time you mix, the ratio is different, and your painting becomes full of endless mixtures. When a viewer looks at your painting, they shouldn't be able to label your colors, "That's a Payne's Grey sky or Burnt Sienna field." When you mix with pure pigments, you are not at the mercy of a color that is not bright enough or performing as you wish. You become the manufacturer of your color and can develop your own color vocabulary.

Composition is the analytical response when designing a painting whereas color is your emotional response. Your color choices can greatly enhance the emotional power of your composition. A young girl in pastel colors imply innocence. Change the colors to reds and she becomes lively or rebellious. Choose blue colors and the mood is pensive. Imagine Kermit the frog in any other color but a friendly green!

Learning about color involves more than mixing clean color, it is about relationships. While it is pleasing to mix beautiful colors, "mouse colors" are also necessary to make the jewel-like colors sing! You need to think differently about color to achieve certain effects. To turn errors into assets, transparent colors are key. I have an excerpt of this lesson on my website cover page. To obtain "oceanic" color (my word for powerful mixtures) neighboring pigments are used. And "mouse power" greys will give a plain grey day painting lots of soft muted colors.



American Quilt, Watercolor, Jeanne Dobie



Aftermath, Watercolor, Jeanne Dobie

**As an artist who raised children, how did you find or make time to paint?
Did it change how you approached your work?**

This answer could be a book. Finding time is impossible, you simply "steal" it here and there! Being homebound with five children, I painted out the windows, including the house across the street in all climates and times of day, a great way to study the changing effects of light. My friends had studios, while my easel was in the children's playroom with balls bouncing, doll clotheslines tied to my easel, but I could settle arguments and didn't worry about where they were. As the children grew older, I packed their red wagon with food for a small army and could paint outdoors. The children had caterpillar races, invented games, and developed a love of nature. I placed my trophies and ribbons on a shelf in the basement over the washing machine to remind me late at night that in the future I would have time to be a real artist.

When the children were older I could paint outdoors. I paid the eldest girl to baby-sit, and I paid all the younger children IF they minded her. On weekends we loaded the car with paintings, supports, beach paraphernalia, and drove 2-3 hours to the New Jersey seashore outdoor art shows. At my second show, I won a prize. A gentleman bought it and later told me that he was the juror - Henri Marceau, the director of the Philadelphia Museum of Art! I cannot describe the feeling of elation I had!



Three Bretonnes, Watercolor, Jeanne Dobie
Collection of Frye Museum, Seattle, WA

Yes, it dramatically changed the way I paint. Driving the children to play rehearsals, swim meets, scouts, etc., I would pass an exciting scene I wanted to paint. While timing the swim races, or waiting, I would organize the composition in my mind, - rearrange shapes, values, and decide colors. My children were responsible for helping me develop a mental sketch book. When I had time to return to the scene later, I knew how I wanted to paint it.

My approach to painting changed too. Because time is always short, I go straight for the essence. I don't work up to it with painting the background, then the middle ground and the foreground and finally the interest as most books suggest. Whatever excited me, I paint first. If I don't have time to finish, I have captured the nucleus of the painting. To me, this seems a more logical way to work, instead of wasting time painting the whole painting as the books suggest, only to add the interest at the end which may not work and disappoint you.

**What is your response when someone says he doesn't have time to paint?
(I am guilty of this sentiment too often myself.)**

When I was writing my book, I registered to take English courses over again at a local college so they would be fresh in my mind as I wrote. I attended classes early AM, then drove into Philadelphia to teach my art classes at Moore College of Art. The rest of the book was written while everyone was asleep until 4 AM. I still find that late night time is a productive time for me, so I place a pencil and pad under my pillow to jot down thoughts, and ideas (lots that I'll never get around to doing) so I can go back to sleep.

My husband, an engineer, turned into a race car driver (and still does) on weekends. We towed the race car to beautiful mountainous courses where our children loved camping, he raced, and I painted. I believe in combining your art with your life, because your life is reflected in your art. It is not important how many paintings you paint, nor how well you paint them technically, but it is important how thoughtfully your paintings are painted!

Nowadays, artists are fortunate to have the advantage of a multitude of books, workshops, DVD's, and internet learning sites that are readily available.



Sun Prisms and Showers, Watercolor, Jeanne Dobie

**I've read that when working
on a piece, you like to approach a painting by having some sort of
concept in mind. What sort of concepts? Do you have it in mind when
you first bring brush to page or does that develop as you're painting?**

I enjoy having a challenge that makes painting more exciting for me and hopefully will lift my result out of the realm of ordinary. Before I begin, I analyze why I was attracted to the subject. Can I convey the activity of a "celebration" or the "stillness" of a very hot day. Perhaps it is pushing your reflections in a cove into an eye-catching design that makes your reflections more exciting than your subject. It is very important to have your concept anchored in your mind as you paint, so you can see subtle directions, colors, and ways to contribute to it throughout.

Color allocations can create excitement too. In my painting "Twilight", I dropped jewel-like colors that glowed into the white boats which enlivened a large dark shadow. Now imagine that painting with only white boats and no special gem-like colors. In "Winter Harbor" the cold glacier and its glittering reflections were the

focus, so I chose saturated earthy colors for the boats that contrasted and accented the "icy" effect.



Left to Right: *V.I.P. Cottage*, Watercolor; *Pipersville Preservation*, Acrylic, Jeanne Dobie

How did you learn to paint? Did you attend art school or teach yourself with books, DVDs, and live workshops? Which teachers have influenced your work and how?

My mother was a Elementary School teacher and encouraged me. We had prints of famous paintings on the walls and listened to operas on the radio. When I was nine years old, I promised my brother I would win a dog for him and I did! - a pedigreed Cocker Spaniel in a national contest in Playmate Magazine, Cleveland, Ohio. With that taste of success, I set a goal to win a prize every year, culminating later in four scholarships to the Philadelphia Museum School of Art (now the University of the Arts).



Winter Harbor, Watercolor, Jeanne Dobie

Marriage and five children, pets, and a donkey, made it impossible to participate in the exhibits and view shows that my art friends were enjoying. So I decided to redirect my priorities into productive channels and use my homebound years to grow as an artist. I set up challenges for myself to improve my painting. I learned to make my greens livelier by eliminating blue. I explored glazing, not only in paintings, but to turn errors into assets. I coined the word

"oceanic" to describe powerful mixtures. Although I didn't know it at the time, this period of intense concentration would come to play a major role in my art career. These challenges became my lessons later when I taught at Moore College of Art and in workshops around the United States and in my "Paint-escapes" to Europe. Eventually, after three decades of sharing my color approaches, I became eager to pursue my own work. For artists who want to study my color lessons, they can "attend" my Making Color Sing DVD Workshop, which was filmed by a movie director in Arizona locations during my week long workshop for the Northern Arizona Watercolor Society.

As an art educator yourself, when a student takes a workshop, how would you suggest she prepares for that workshop? What expectations should she have going in and coming out?

This question has been covered so extensively in articles, that I'm sure that I am giving you the same answers. Do obtain the supplies that the teacher requested and become slightly familiar with the brushes and colors before beginning the workshop for best results. Personally, I would feel that I'm there to learn what the teacher is offering and would immerse myself completely (even if you feel differently). You can adapt the instruction later to your ideas.



Village by the Sea, Watercolor, Jeanne Dobie

It is more valuable to learn something new than to obtain a masterpiece. The knowledge you gain will contribute to many new "masterpieces" in the future.

Being inspired by an artist (and her workshop) can sometimes lead to imitation. How have you managed to learn from other artists and then fold some aspects of theirs into your own style?

I have told my students not to waste their time trying to paint like someone else. Their time is better spent developing their own thoughts and expressions. If a student admires another artist, they should analyze what exactly they admire, that is not merely technique. Is it simplicity, unusual compositions, atmospheric effects, whatever it is, and strive to add that direction to their own work.



Untouched By Time, Watercolor, Jeanne Dobie

What major break throughs have you had as an artist? Where there times in your career (as an intermediate painter or as an advanced painter) where you were frustrated? How did you push through those? Was it attending a workshop or trying something completely different style wise?

When Watson-Guptill asked me to put my color ideas into a book, I was forced to verbalize my thoughts into solid, concrete lessons. I spent five years writing my book. This greatly strengthened my lessons in both my book and in my DVD Workshop.

It was a great honor and validation when my painting "Three Bretonnes" won the High Winds Award at the American Watercolor Society Exhibition and was purchased by the Charles and Emma Frye Museum, Seattle, Washington. I was

inspired to strive for a "museum" quality in my future work.



Rock Garden by the Sea, Watercolor, Jeanne Dobie

My years spent in the Florida Keys were a major breakthrough in my art work also. The tiny islands are surrounded by large bodies of water that act like a giant mirror and reflect light into shadows everywhere. It presented a whole new world of not just light, but luminosity. Shadows were sometimes yellow as in my "V.I.P. Cottage", or pink as in "Colors of an Island Evening." Yellow light bounces appeared under eaves of cottages, even

white walls were often bathed in delicate glows. I learned to "blush" my lights and use glazes for luminous shadows. My Keys paintings started to appear on the covers and in articles of the art magazines, *Watercolor* and *Watercolor Artist*.

My frustrations have been with time restraints, having to stop painting or give it up due to an emergency, that when I have a chance to paint, - I'm happy. It doesn't matter to me if it is a masterpiece or not. Currently, I'm exploring acrylics, using them in an oil medium manner which is very different from my liquid watercolor way of painting. I can adjust colors to my heart's content. And it's a new challenge.



Moped Shadows, Greece, Watercolor, Jeanne Dobie

Speaking of style, how did you come to find your style? Did that happen when you were an advanced painter or did it happen earlier as an intermediate or even beginner painter?

Style. I prefer to call it developing your individuality. Developing your art personality I believe is based on a way of "seeing" rather than a way of painting. Often the watercolorist is caught up in the medium of watercolor. The medium is not the message. Ask yourself, would your painting be a solid painting if done in any other medium, or have you relied upon spontaneous or accidental effects? How you interpret, add to, envision your subject - that should be your style, - a painting that reflects YOU - not the medium.

I love to extract a "glow" that emanates from within the paper. I try to keep my paintings simplified, but I have to restrain myself from putting in all the vibrating colors I see. As I have taught in my book, surrounding your interest with dozens of gems will make it difficult for your special interest jewel to glow, or to be noticed.

My style is still evolving and I hope it always will be.

To learn more about watercolor artist Jeanne Dobie, visit her [website](#).