

## Tales from the Mat: Yoga of Art

By Dory Kanter

When Julie asked me to write an article about the connection between yoga and art, I thought, "Perfect! I love yoga and I love art!" But what is the connection? Over the last few months, on and off the mat, I've pondered this topic and did indeed discover ways in which art and yoga marry to enrich my life. At heart, both art and yoga grace me with space and breathing room for the spirit. As an artist, I am grateful for my practice of yoga. The artist Isamu Noguchi said, "I don't think art comes from art. I think it comes from awakening." Yoga is nothing if not a spiritual wake-up call. My artistic life and my practice of yoga are connected in several ways.

### Relax to Begin

The first strand of connection is the importance of a calm mind. This is not always easy for me! I appreciate the reminders in yoga class to "move into silence," as Julie says, and to "let go of your day." When I calm my body, I calm my mind and start the free flow of imagination. When my mind is hijacked by thoughts of the everyday, my creativity is hijacked too. Yoga has taught me through asana and through the breath to slow down, quiet the mind and awaken the spirit.

The best times for me in my art studio are when the outer world goes away and painting becomes a little world of its own – a universe of color, texture and brushstroke. I relish the release from worries, distractions, insecurities; that release allows me to focus and revel in the magic of the moment. To paraphrase the artist Phillip Guston, when you're in the studio painting, there are a lot of people in there with you – your teachers, friends, painters from history, critics. One by one – when you're painting – they walk out. And if you're really painting, *you* walk out. There is pure pleasure in the feeling of absorption and self-forgetfulness when I'm totally engaged in painting *or* doing a headstand. This is on a good day, of course! Some days in the studio are frustrating, discouraging and downright stressful. I'm grateful that I know a bag of tricks learned from my yoga classes that help me to relax, calm down and open up the flow of creativity once again.

### Expand Your Awareness

Another strand of connection between yoga and art is the importance of attention. When I was eight years old, I witnessed a

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miracle when I mixed red and blue tempera paint together for the first time. Purple! I was amazed back then and I've been fascinated by color ever since. It gets my attention. Seeing ribbons of paint swirl and mix together on the paper always makes me smile as I pay close attention to the nuances and subtleties of hue.

Yoga has trained my mind to more easily pay attention to the present moment: to listen to the birds outside the window, smell the fragrance in the air, notice the colors of the flowers. The act of making a painting asks me to do the same. I enlist all the senses to drink in the scene in front of me before interpreting those sensory impressions into a work of art. Before painting I often sit and literally breathe in the landscape for a few quiet moments. I like to take what I call "sensory walks" and ask myself to isolate each of the senses to focus on just one sensation at a time before moving to the next. What scents are in the air? What sounds do I hear? What does the air feel like on my skin?



*Le Manoir de Mougins*, acrylic on canvas, 20x16

In the painting, *Le Manoir de Mougins*, I took liberties with the true colors of the landscape in order to express my sensory impressions of a beautiful hot day in the south of France. The sky became pink, mauve and coral, and the grass

became bright yellow-orange. Painting is a deeply sensual and immediate experience. It invites me to go off automatic pilot and *not* paint the sky blue and the grass green. Painting requires seeing with a fresh perspective and a spirit of visual and sensory exploration of the here and now. In the same way, my yoga teachers encourage me to use asana to become more conscious and aware. I feel my powers of observation have developed as a result of learning how to focus on minute aspects of alignment of the body. I have to say, I never thought about my trapezius muscles before Julie introduced them to me! I first had to be aware of that part of my body before I could begin to try to move them.

### **Stay with Your Attention**

The sutras tell us that the goal of yoga is to bring your attention to one single point. Painting teaches me to focus my attention on the brushstrokes of the canvas in front of me. In fact, you have to focus or the result is a mess! I have also learned that neither the study of yoga nor the study of painting will ever end. I'll never

know it all. Renoir's last words about painting, at the age of 78, were "I think I'm beginning to learn something about it." I've come to understand that observing how I react to the frustration and embarrassment of repeated attempts at a pesky pose is the practice itself. This understanding has helped me when the resolution of a creative project is maddeningly elusive. I've learned through yoga to breathe, relax, stay detached and stop the self-talk of limitations.

### **Flowers, Mountains and Beyond**

Another thread between yoga and art is the connection between the philosophy of yoga and the subjects I am stirred to paint. The watercolor, *Flower Scatter*, was inspired by the idea of being in the present. The composition itself came about by engaging in the present moment. I decided to see what happened when I tossed two flowers and a leaf onto a piece of paper and let the happenstance of that quick gesture create the composition. I painted the flowers and leaf exactly where they fell and created a painting around the spontaneity of the moment.



*Flower Scatter*, watercolor on paper, 22x15



*Misty Mountains*, watercolor on paper, 20x16

Another subject that has inspired me to create a series of paintings comes from the Buddhist image of the Self as a mountain. The story goes that although there are clouds and storms at the top of the mountain, the base is solid. Sometimes you can't even see the top of the mountain, but you know that deep down, there is a solid rock foundation at the base. It reminds me to step back from daily disasters, practice detachment and have faith in the

strength of the soul. I refer to drawings I made during a trip to see the dramatically misty peaks of the Yellow Mountains in China. These paintings weave together both a place in China I love with a philosophy I treasure for its wisdom.

Truthfully I had always thought of art and yoga as separate and parallel pursuits, but now realize how deeply they are interwoven into the fabric of my life. The definition of the word yoga as union is especially apt when I reflect on this synthesis of art and asana.

One night this past year, Julie began and ended our class by repeating the suggestion to "Relax to begin, expand your awareness, and stay with your attention." Those simple and beautiful words of invitation resonated with me that evening. Indeed they beautifully express the link that ties my practice of yoga with my practice of painting, helping me to bring the creative and the spiritual into greater alignment.

**Dory Kanter** is the author of the book, *Art Escapes: Daily Exercises and Inspirations for Discovering Greater Creativity and Artistic Confidence*, published in 2003 by North Light Books, available at Art Media and online at [Amazon](#). For more information about tours and workshops, or to visit her virtual gallery, visit [Dory's website](#).