

Ignite Your Imagination

in the New Year

12 ideas to jump-start your creativity each month

By Dory Kanter

When I was little, I drew everywhere—on scraps of paper, on my walls, in the night air with my finger. It was magical. Today I keep that spirit of pure joy alive in my sketchbook. This is where I play with paint and create drawings for enjoyment alone. My sketchbook habit is my oasis in my day, a way for me to savor the moment.

Making an artistic journal is a great way to keep your creative juices flowing all through the year. And what better way to record them than in your sketchbook? These 12 creative exercises will expand your imagination, enhance your drawing and painting skills, and provide you with ideas for projects throughout the year.

January: One-Minute Drawings
Roughly sketch six, 2 x 2-inch boxes on one journal page. Without editing or erasing, do a few 30-second drawings to warm up, and then move on to one-minute drawings of whatever catches your eye. Let your eyes do the drawing for you. Keep your gaze on the object more than on the paper in front of you. You also can draw quick sketches all over a page without boxes or overlap drawings. With this technique, you'll get better and better at capturing the essence of a scene or subject in just a short amount of time.

Small-Frame Format

I drew these pencil drawings while traveling through Italy by bus. The small-frame format inspired me to fill in the little drawn boxes with details from the scenery outside the window. This technique is a marvelous way to freeze-frame a sequential experience. I once drew a page of little one-minute drawings of our arrival by ferryboat to a harbor. As we moved, the island and harbor town we were approaching came closer and closer into view, and the composition of sky, island and water changed rapidly. When you try this, be sure to make the little boxes on your page first, so you can draw in each one in quick succession.



February: Three's Company

Using just three colors, you can simplify your palette and enhance color harmony at the same time. With three pure pigments you can mix an infinite and expressive range of hues. Use a palette of red, yellow and blue to make a painting with pure pigments, brights, shades, grays and darks. There simply are no wrong colors because they all relate to each other.

Pure pigments for the yellow, red and blue flowers.

Brights in the sunlit areas of the vase.

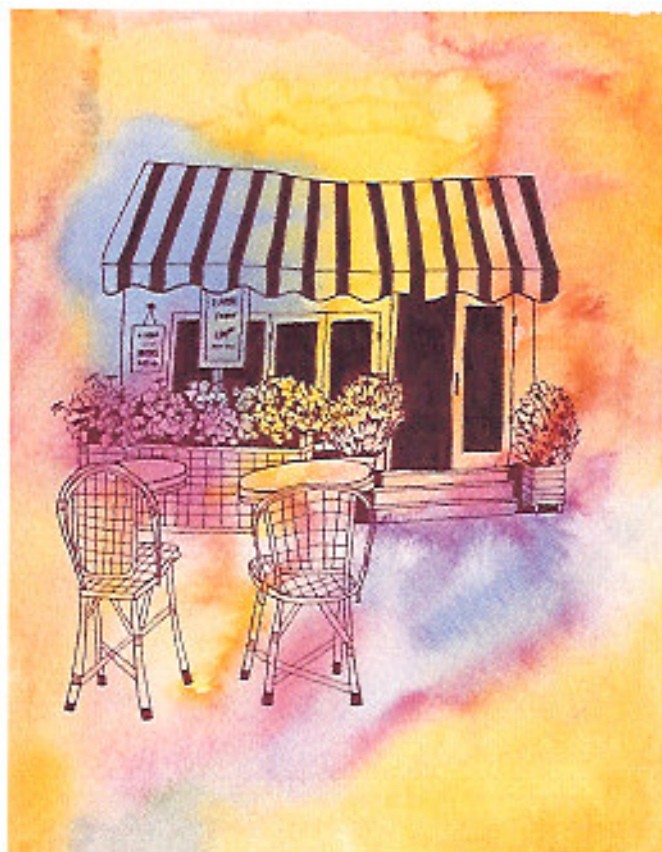
Shades of violet in the shadow area of the vase.

Grays and darks in the cast shadow.



Just the Primaries

For Peonies and Fire Orchids (watercolor on paper, 10 x 14), Karin Felker Harris used the three primaries to create a harmonious color scheme.



March: First Paint, Then Draw

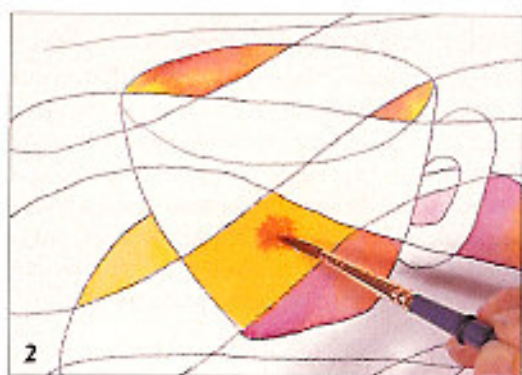
Approach your subject with color first and worry about the lines later. When I want to capture both color and subject quickly, I often try to mirror the colors I see by painting in watercolor first. The advantage to this is that I'm sure to get some crucial color notes on my page before the light changes or I run out of time and have to leave. After the paint dries, I then add pen lines over the paint to describe the subject in detail.

Draw On Top of Your Colors

I created this page in my artistic journal by first painting, then drawing on a sheet of watercolor paper. I applied watercolor in a loose fashion, trying to mirror the colors of the Parisian street scene in front of me. I didn't worry about the placement of the colors at all. The aqua blue of the sky, the reds and oranges of the flowers, and the yellow of the awning all appear in my underpainting. I added the drawing after the paint dried, using both fine and ultra-fine waterproof felt-tip pens.

April: The Power of Prisms

One of my favorite journaling activities is what I call café art. I complete a page in my journal in the time it takes me to finish sipping a drink. This creative replenishment helps me bring the everyday into a different focus and find beauty in the commonplace. The next time you go to a café, try this fun exercise.



Step 1: Draw and Scribble

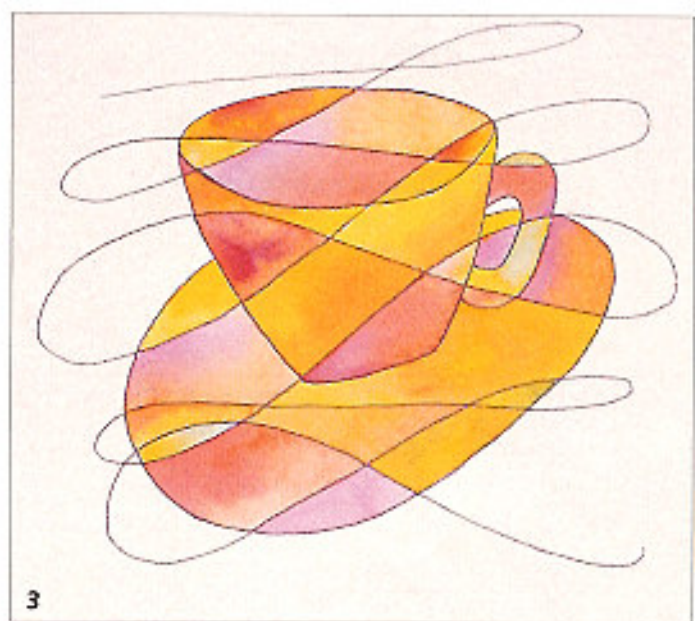
Draw an uncomplicated cup and saucer and scribble a few swooshes, loops, swirls and figure eights over it. Let yourself go with the flow of the moment. Prismatic shapes will emerge in front of you as the lines intersect with each other. Keep these intersecting shapes large enough by not adding too many lines.

Step 2: Drop in Color

Paint each prismatic shape a different color. While the paper is still shiny and wet, drop in other colors to make beautiful diffused color mixtures. Be sure to let each section dry before painting the one next to it.

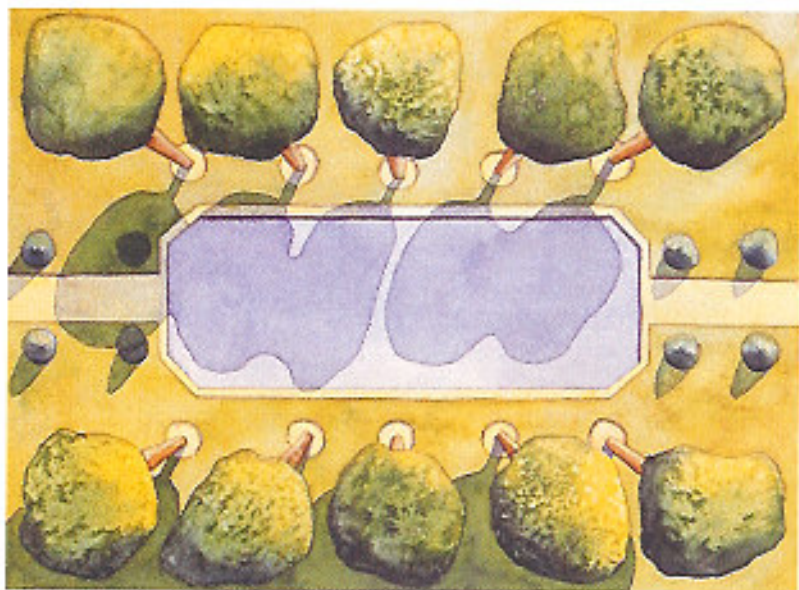
Step 3: Paint Each Shape Uniquely

Continue painting each prismatic section, creating a kaleidoscope of rainbow colors in each one. This technique not only allows you to see beauty in a common cup and saucer, but it also can be used to make unique backgrounds for other paintings.



May: Paint from a Bird's-Eye View

I discovered this style of painting several years ago as I stood atop a tall Venetian tower and looked at the garden directly below. I loved seeing the design the trees and their shadow patterns made from this unusual vantage point. Pretend you're a bird flying over your own home or garden or invent a new one. Concentrate on the overall blueprint, not the details, and draw a sketch of what it would look like from above. Paint what you see, paying attention to perspective and shadow.

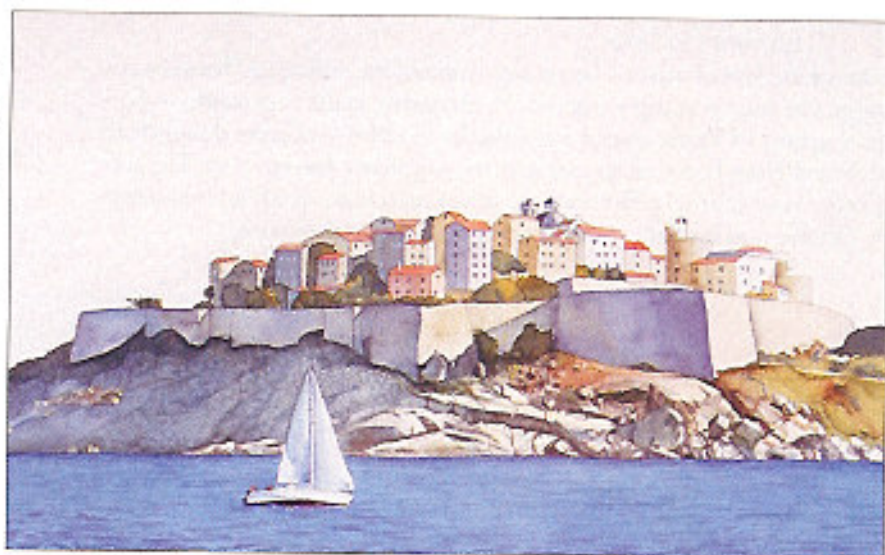


Imagine a Garden From Above

This invented landscape helped me escape from the ordinary by envisioning a garden in my mind's eye as it would look from the sky. I highlighted the shadow patterns of the trees and bushes, as well as showed a blueprint of the whole garden plan.

June: Leave Out a Ground

My students laugh when I tell them that what I leave out of a landscape is more important than what I put in. Before composing a landscape, take a good look at your subject, and identify the foreground, middle ground and background. Isolate each of these areas in your mind, seeing each one distinct from the other two. This can become a liberating form of creative framing. You can easily paint the same scene several times, leaving out and including different grounds as you change your frame of mind. In fact, you can frame one subject at least seven different ways (as shown below).



Eliminate the Background and Preserve the White of the Paper

This watercolor painting was inspired by a photograph taken by my friend, Robert Cantor, while on vacation in Corsica (below, left). After framing the scene in my head, I decided to concentrate on the two elements most significant to me, the sea and sailboat of the foreground, and the citadel in the middle ground. I eliminated the background mountains, sky and clouds. Leaving the background area unpainted focuses attention on the stunning play of light and shadows on the walls, rocks and houses of the citadel, and the graceful sailboat skimming the brilliant blue sea. It also made it faster to paint!



Photo © Robert Cantor

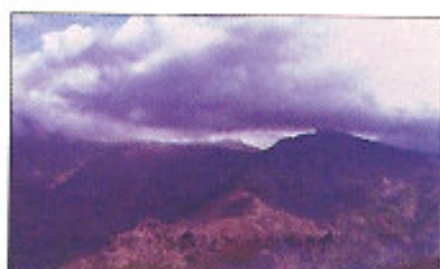
1. Background, middle ground and foreground



2. Foreground only



3. Middle ground only



4. Background only



5. Foreground and middle ground



6. Foreground and background



7. Middle ground and background

July: Souvenirs to Savor

One of the joys of travel is becoming aware of the differences between cultures. On your next trip—whether it's abroad or to the next county—gather a group of items spiced with the local color—objects delightfully different from home or special in some singularly foreign way. The subjects of your journal collections are direct reflections of what you uniquely observe and love about the country, state or city you visit.

Collecting French Ice Creams

I never could've predicted the fabulous flavors of ice cream in southern France. I realized on my first day in Nice that I had to make an exhaustive, personal study of the subject. My husband was happy to offer his assistance as we sampled an array of ice-cream cones during my journal "research." First, I put empty ice-cream cone sketches on my page, then filled in the names of the flavors and colors of the scoops as I went along. It took me two weeks to finish this journal page. I patiently waited for the most amazing flavors to appear before including them in my collection. The flavors I discovered were violet, honey-lavender, lavender, green apple, tomato-basil and olives of Nice.



August: Write it Down

You can be inspired by any number of stimuli in a natural setting—the summer breeze, a bird's song, a field of wildflowers. The important thing is that you recognize what stirs you and remember it. Start by recording your impressions of a landscape in your sketchbook journal. Write for 10 minutes continuously, without editing. What does the air feel like? What sounds do you hear? What colors attract your eye? After your 10-minute "free-write," give your painting-to-be a working title, even before you begin painting. This title will remind you of your original inspiration.

Never Forget Your First Impression

After taking some moments to drink in the landscape, I like to record my sensations by writing in my artistic journal. I always make note of the time of day and the date. In the process of recording my sensory reactions, I find it easier to distinguish vivid sources of artistic inspiration.



Making Memories

A simple idea can create a beautiful travel memory page. This is the title page of one of my travel journals. I always begin with a page indicating the destination and the date. On the day we arrived, I fell in love with these little lavender sachets sewn with Provençal fabrics. The page is a collection, first drawn in pencil, then painted in watercolor.

*Aurillac - France - 2:30 pm - August 20 -
I'm sitting on the sunny patio of
our rustic rented house ... my feet on the
warm paving stones ... crickets or locusts
chirp & buzz all around, then suddenly
stop until the bug chorus starts up again
... the vineyard bursts with fresh
green shoots & heavy leaves ... everywhere
I look I see or feel or touch life ... even
the earth is alive with a robust red-amber
hue ... the sky too is lit with life ... is
it the heat that makes it shimmer? ...
a light breeze whispers at my neck & hugs
my legs ... the breeze brought the scent
of lavender, rosemary & thyme ... I
can almost taste the tang of the herbs
on my tongue ... I want to stitch together
the abundance, fertility, fruitfulness,
& vitality of this radiant & vibrant
landscape into my painting.*

Possible title - Summer Abundance

September: Paint Your Senses

Each of our five senses is a precious gift. Create a shrine of appreciation to each of them by painting abstract watercolors inspired by each sense. The five-senses exercise invites you to be attentive to your senses, one at a time. Discover a place of sanctuary. Wherever that place is for you, take a few moments for what I call a sensory walk. Gently shut down the rest of your mind and as you walk, simply listen, smell, see, taste and feel. Hold onto each impression for a moment. Take notes about each sense and how you might like to portray it.



Sense of Taste

I like to make five-senses paintings on blank watercolor postcards. These are very handy, especially when traveling. This painting represents my sense of taste while in Turkey. I savored the fresh vegetables, the rich Turkish coffee, delicious black olives, tangy goat cheese ... all that and more is in this watercolor! To create texture, I scratched into the wet paint with the edge of a credit card, sprinkled salt onto the surface and spattered red paint from my brush.



Sense of Smell

This little painting represents what I perceived through my sense of smell as I took a sensory walk in a seaside town. The restaurants must have been preparing for lunch—my nose picked up the marine air of the sea and the pungent scents of the fisherman's fresh catch, as well as very tangible notes of garlic, olive oil and eggplant sizzling. All the scents were distinct, but they melded together into a beautiful sensory concoction.



Sense of Sight

I feel as if I'm back in the Italian seaside town of Portovenere when I see this watercolor. After a sensory walk, I settled into a fine café and encapsulated my impressions of sight into this abstract painting. As I look at it now, I recall the warm tan tones of the ever-present stone building blocks, sunshine and the colorful umbrellas of all the cafés lining the harbor. It's amazing how many memories these watercolors bring back.



Sense of Touch

As I sat in the sun on the rooftop of my Istanbul hotel, I thought about all the sensations of touch I remembered from the previous two weeks in Turkey. There were soft, warm breezes and sharper, cooler winds and brisk dives into the sea. There was also the smoothness of hand-polished woodwork on our boat and the relaxed feeling throughout my whole body as I lay on the deck while we sailed. It was a pleasure to recall all these sensory memories, and great fun to bundle them up into an abstract painting.



Sense of Hearing

I made this watercolor painting while I was sitting in a café by the yacht harbor in a small Mediterranean town in France. I was sitting peacefully, sipping a fresh-squeezed lemonade, listening to the gentle sounds of water lapping against the ancient seawall and splashing against the yachts anchored in the harbor. All of a sudden, an ambulance arrived with a screaming siren. The red stripes in my painting represent the sound of the blaring horn in contrast to the soft purples and greens representing the sound of the water and the tinkle of cups and glasses in the café. After completing the painting, I cut it into four strips to create a collage. You can see that some sounds appear louder than others.

October: Walk on the Wild Side

I know a wonderful landscape photographer who can make a familiar scene appear totally fresh by showing the viewer a completely new perspective. His secret is to assume that for the first 15 minutes all his shots will be the usual, trite responses. After he gets the obvious out of his system, he begins to discover unusual angles. I've seen him crouch down on his hands and knees to shoot up at a sharp angle and jump on top of a stone wall to shoot his subject from above.

I follow his advice when *plein air* painting and assume that my first drawings are going to be the most ordinary ones. I allow myself the time to work past conventional compositions. After my first attempts, I start seeing from a more unique perspective. Give yourself permission to get warmed up and go a little wild. Walk around and explore the landscape for 15 minutes to allow unexpected viewpoints to arise. Then begin sketching your scene.

November: Paper, Glue, Scissors

Henri Matisse (1869-1954) created vibrant collages by “drawing with scissors.” Inspired by the freedom of his method, I create my own version of painted paper with cutouts in my artistic journals. Design without drawing—let your scissors describe the shapes for you. Don't like the shape? Just cut it again!



Cut it Out

Manica Wheeler interpreted her love of the island of Mykonos in this bold magenta watercolor cutout *Why Mykonos?* (watercolor on paper, 10 x 8). You can almost feel the warm sunset glow over the windmills so typical of this Greek island. Against the white paper of her journal page, the monochromatic color is brilliant in its simplicity.

December: Get into the Grooves

Japanese Masa paper looks similar to white butcher paper, but it's much stronger when wet. I crunched up a piece of unwaxed Masa paper, then unfolded it and began painting it with watercolor. When finished, I lightly tacked this watercolor sketch onto my journal page with a dab of glue at each of the corners. I love the instant texture that developed on the painted mountains. As the wet watercolor soaks into the grooves of the crinkles, batik-like lines and veins appear on the surface. ♦

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