

# 20 DIGITAL PAINTING TIPS

SHARPEN YOUR BRUSH STROKES AND WIDEN YOUR CREATIVITY BY EMBRACING THESE TOP TIPS FROM DIGITAL ARTISTS, WHO WORK ACROSS VARIOUS FIELDS INCLUDING FINE ART, COMICS, CHARACTER CREATION AND EDITORIAL PROJECTS



## 1. PAINT DIRECTIONAL LIGHT

**SALEM AL-LANGAWI**  
www.behance.net/salemallangawiart  
Artist and tutor Salem Al-Langawi (www.behance.net/salemallangawiart) paints sunlight directly onto

his subject to give his artwork Freedom an inspirational edge.

■ **Fill background** I start by simply filling the monochromatic base background colour to unify the base colour of each element that is contained within the piece.

■ **Draw outlines** I create an outline layer for both the character and the background environment; in this case, the clouds and sky.

■ **Summon round brush** I begin painting with the basic solid round brush, and also the soft round brush with the Pen pressure mode assigned, in order to fill in the basic colours of each element.

■ **Define light direction** I decide where my source of light is positioned so I can start filling the deeper colours that form the areas of shadow, then approach the midtones and finish with the highlight areas.

■ **Create focal point** To make my character stand out, I finalised it by setting a deeper Transfer rate (about 45%) in the brush settings, to give it a sharp hard edge and working closely on the subject.

■ **Blur focus** For the clouds in the background, I used the soft round brush to give the impression of an out-of-focus camera effect without having to rely on the use of a filter.



© Salem Al-Langawi



## 2. USE CUSTOM BRUSHES

**MARTA DAHLIG**  
www.dahlig.deviantart.com



© Marta Dahlig

Marta Dahlig's (www.dahlig.deviantart.com) digital paintings have steadily gathered a loyal following, especially for the finer details of facial features and hair that she adds to her dramatic characters. To master the ability to seamlessly paint detailed features, Marta recommends starting a collection of custom brushes to help you along the way.

"They give you the ability to define any texture, specifically tailoring it to a part you wish to paint. This means that aside from a set of general, all-purpose brushes, you can have a few specialised ones that will greatly improve the impact of your work. Among many, I have brushes for texturing hair (a few dots

which generate slightly pixelated lines for texture), for texturing skin (adding a grainy texture to a surface) and for linen (a few scratches with a texture overlay to get a very rough, strand effect)." Before you start diving in to tackle complex features, however, Marta recommends getting to grips with the basics first. "Don't get into texturing and defining every eyelash or skin pore before you are comfortable with anatomy. When it comes to portraits, there really is no point in covering poorly painted features with lots of details. So get comfortable with shapes and colours first and then, when you reach a consistent quality in choosing your skin tones, move on to the details."



## 3. GO FREEHAND

**LORENZ HIDEYOSHI RUWWE**  
www.hideyoshi-ruwwe.net



© Lorenz Hideyoshi Ruwwe

Lorenz Hideyoshi Ruwwe (www.hideyoshi-ruwwe.net) is a freelance art director, concept artist and illustrator. His client list includes some impressive names in the entertainment industry and he has worked on projects in the gaming and film industries too. Here, Lorenz shares some of his inside tips on a poster that he created for a short film project called *The Underwater Realm* (www.theunderwaterrealm.com).

This dramatic painting forms one of five poster illustrations that Lorenz created for the films and is titled *1588*, after one of the short films in the series. The films explore the five occasions when humans have caught a glimpse of the mysterious Atlanteans.

"I was given a very rough line-art doodle by the director for the general layout, so I started off with a broad idea of how to structure the painting. I then looked for references on war ships of the era and started to paint in all of the elements, based on a quick composite that I put together of two photos of a sky and water. The ships and most of the other elements are all painted in freehand." Lorenz says that Photoshop played a vital role in putting the piece together. "For this painting, it was particularly helpful to have full control over colour correction, so that I could tie together all the individual elements well. I use a pretty fixed set of favourite tools – like transforms, gradients and the blend modes in general – when I add textures or paint with brushes."



© Rob Fuller



## 4. PAINT FROM A PHOTOGRAPH

**ROB FULLER**  
www.robfuller.co.uk

To create the official poster for *Automate*, a short film directed by Martin Stirling, Rob Fuller (www.robfuller.co.uk) used a photo reference to start off with.



■ **Sketch an idea** The first thing I did was create a basic Photoshop composition of the poster image using the photo references for the different elements within the design. I then traced this image to create a set of guidelines that helped to keep the image on track throughout.



■ **Build colour** Whilst continually referring to the photo references, I then built up the background colours so that the canvas was completely covered. After that, I built up the image layer by layer, each time decreasing my brush size and increasing the level of detail.



■ **Add finer details** The final steps of the painting involved putting in all of the last bits of detail and extra highlights. I then reviewed the image and subtly tweaked elements such as colour balance and contrast. The final step was to create all the titles and text to complete the poster.





### 5. USE MODULAR DESIGNS

ARSTHANEA  
www.arsthanea.com

Warsaw-based agency Ars Thanea ([www.arsthanea.com](http://www.arsthanea.com)) cast their thoughts back to yesteryear when they were coming up with the concept to promote HBO's 2013 original series line-up. With hand-painted, character-based posters in mind, they set out to create a gigantic four-page gatefold advertisement that would show all of the characters that appear in these much-loved series. Under the watchful eye of Executive Creative Director Peter Jaworowski, everything in the poster was digitally painted from scratch, with the iconic logo from each individual show accompanying its characters. The layout of the poster means that it has the flexibility to handle being split up into each of the component shows for different forms of media, like separating the *Boardwalk Empire* section from the *True Blood* characters to create a self-standing poster, for example. Ars Thanea went on to create single-page ads, banners, posters and premiums for the campaign.



### 6. START WITH SHAPES

NICOLETTA PAGANO  
www.nicolettapagano.com

Traditionally trained Nicoletta Pagano ([www.nicolettapagano.com](http://www.nicolettapagano.com)) applies her sketch and painting skills to her digital work. Here she shows off a character from a print campaign made for a fitness program, playing on the subject line 'eliminate the superfluous'. The character started out as overlapping geometric shapes and was very far from the final image.



■ **Think traditionally** Using my traditional training, I paint as though the tablet is a canvas and the pen a brush, with the same logic I apply to acrylics or oil.

■ **Play with shapes** The great advantage of digital painting, to me, is the ability to evaluate and choose between alternative solutions for the hue and contrast.

■ **Overlap layers** I use Photoshop brushes and work on many different overlapping layers. My illustrations are essentially hundreds of overlapping layers.



### 7. RESEARCH YOUR SUBJECT

ALON CHOU  
www.alon.yw

Alon Chou ([www.alon.tw](http://www.alon.tw)) has a wide portfolio that includes concept and cover art, game posters and illustrations. Traditionally trained, he combines skill with digital know-how. Commissioned by Vector EA – Artes Electrónicas, Alon created this stunning painting for the project *Lisbon Siege – 1147*.

"She is a real historical figure, Queen Mafalda de Sabóia, who was also the wife of Afonso Henriques, the Founder of Portugal," Alon tells us. "In this picture, she is about twenty years old. She has a strong religious and moral background and is very unhappy in her arranged marriage. My client asked me to best present her character, especially the feeling of loneliness, with the right costume design for her period. I spent a lot of time collecting information on the dress style in Portugal during that age to give the image the correct historical context. I also made a great effort to try to figure out her expression, emotion and movements. Finally, one of the most important things was to focus on creating exceptional light and shadow for the whole picture. For other artists working in digital painting, I would have two suggestions: first, try to take your laptop with you to sketch the scenes that you've seen; this will be very helpful in improving your observational abilities. Second, try your best to draw what you really like, and with the effort to create your work as it is in your mind. Do that, and I believe wonderful things will begin to happen."



### 8. BE EXPERIMENTAL

CYRIL ROLANDO  
www.aquasixio.deviantart.com

Artist Cyril Rolando ([www.aquasixio.deviantart.com](http://www.aquasixio.deviantart.com)) walks us through *The Last Sound on Earth*, one of a series of twelve pieces inspired by musical instruments.

■ **The inspiration** For this series, I tried to link an emotion, an element and an instrument in each of the twelve artworks. In this painting the keywords are 'Earth', 'loneliness' and 'double bass'.

■ **Digital sketching** My entire process is digital. I sketch on one layer and then use additional layers to build the background and the details.

■ **Working with colour** I use a lot adjustment layers, such as Selective Colour and Colour Balance. I am often quite indecisive about the colour; I change it all the time depending on my mood.

■ **Brush preferences** I paint with only the traditional and basic round brushes, and I haven't experimented too much with the full scope of brushes either.

■ **Enjoy the process** I would advise readers to have fun while they paint and to persevere in their art.

■ **Understanding others** Don't feel jealous of other artists' work; instead, feel inspired by them and try to understand their process, and then learn from it.



### 9. ADD TEXTURE

PETER NAGY  
www.behance.net/peternagy

Inspired by the idea of a small girl with a large creature, Peter Nagy ([www.behance.net/peternagy](http://www.behance.net/peternagy)) set about painting *Dragon*. "The big creature was built up from boxes and balloons, to keep in all the air," he explains. "Incorporating the summer and the sea were the finishing touches I added to the project."

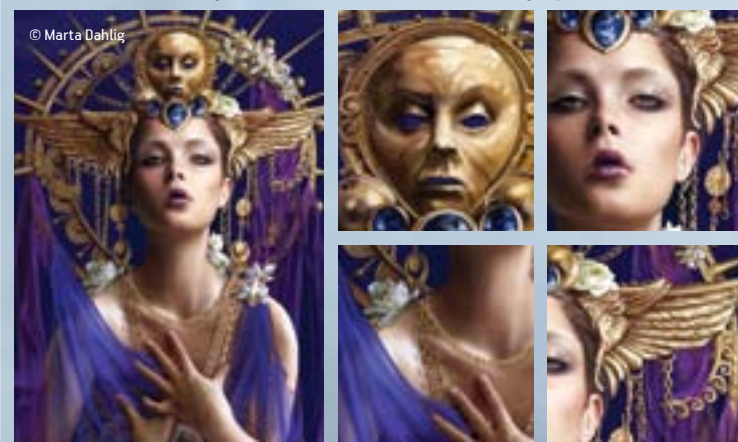
Peter says he switches between creating initial sketches on the Wacom Intuos 4L and old-fashioned pencil and paper. "*Dragon* was a simple project and I didn't use any personalised brushes. The Pen tool was the main tool used to create the shapes. The blurred elements in the picture are important because they help to focus the story, as is the texture. In my opinion, a good texture is one of the most important layers to help pull off this style. For this texture, I drew a simple picture and added it as a Photoshop layer style, but what it was is my secret..."



### 10. BALANCE OUT COLOURS

MARTA DAHLIG  
www.dahlig.deviantart.com

To create a seamless finish to a portrait, Marta Dahlig recommends spending time with the Color Balance adjustment. "The Color Balance tool can be a great starting point when you are still trying to figure out how your shadows, midtones and highlights should be balanced. It can also improve the final result quickly. For example, I have a tendency to use hues which are more on the yellow side. I sometimes correct this using the Color Balance tool, adding more blues to the shadows and less red, more green, to the highlights. It helps practically every time, especially for portraits." Just as helpful is the New Window view. "Having my illustration open in two windows simultaneously – one zoomed-in and one zoomed-out – I can observe how every stroke I apply up-close looks within the painting. This is an invaluable insight which saves me a lot of time during my workflow."





### 11. HAVE A CLEAR INTENTION

CYRIL ROLANDO  
www.aquasixio.deviantart.com

Cyril Rolando ([www.sixinside.com](http://www.sixinside.com)) describes his artistic style as somewhere between surreal and fantasy. In one word: otherworldly. He paints exclusively with a basic round brush and relies on Photoshop to play with colours, using tools like Selective Color and Colour Balance to tweak and change as he goes. For him, the feeling, intention and expression communicated in a painting trump the technical execution. "Overall, I want to 'tell' and not only 'show'. Tim Burton and Hayao Miyazaki are both the roots of my own world. I like the surrealism movement, especially the work of Boris Vian and his *Froth on the Daydream* (*L'Écume des Jours*). I like the absurdity, the creativity and the enchanting universes, where colours bring the emotions."

Cyril uses a graphite tablet and still uses Photoshop CS2, having tried newer versions and found that all the tools he needs are where he looked first. The subjects in his paintings follow a continuity that comes from exploring a particular subject area. "My characters are often lost children, or children in a quest for their truth (and not The Truth)." He believes that having an intention behind your work can make the technical process much easier and more enjoyable.



© Cyril Rolando

### 13. MIX GENRES

LORENZ HIDEYOSHI RUWWE  
www.hideyoshi-ruwwe.net

When it comes to creating personal work, Lorenz Hideyoshi Ruwwe's ([www.hideyoshi-ruwwe.net](http://www.hideyoshi-ruwwe.net)) allows himself the creative freedom to mix up styles and push his own boundaries.

"This was a personal artwork of mine," Lorenz says. "I'd always wanted to try to mix realistic painting with the Japanese anime style, so I came up with this character. But instead of using a cel-shaded look method, I wanted to treat it like a traditional painting. I started without a very well-outlined concept in mind; it began almost like a sketch exercise that became more fleshed out. I painted everything from imagination without relying on references. That was also because I wanted to create an original, slightly stylised look for the girl. I wanted to play off some vibrant colour shifts in the tones so that my work would greatly benefit from the many blending options in Photoshop. The powerful brush engine also helped get the traditionally painted feel of the strokes. I think that digital painting can only be as good as your traditional skills are, honestly speaking. Tools can be mastered quite easily, but drawing skills should be where you put your focus and begin to progress your training."



© Lorenz Hideyoshi Ruwwe

### 12. DON'T GET LOST IN LAYERS

BENJAMIN ANG  
www.benjaminang.com

Digital painter and comic artist Benjamin Ang ([www.benjaminang.com](http://www.benjaminang.com)) goes against the grain by recommending you keep layers to a

minimum rather than use new ones for each adjustment. Benjamin has worked at Marvel for the last few years and has touched his digital brush to very recognisable characters. He made *Hsien-Ko Kombo* for Capcom/Udon's *Darkstalkers Tribute* book.

"I picked one of my favourite characters from the Darkstalkers franchise and painted her as if I was painting a Marvel trading card in the early Nineties. Whenever I'm happy, I flatten my layers and move on. I find this method more productive as it eliminates time wasted on second-guessing, and going back and forth between multiple layers. I always remind myself that the software is supposed to help me work faster. Just remember to keep your original line sketch, as it often holds your purest thoughts, which are usually the best."



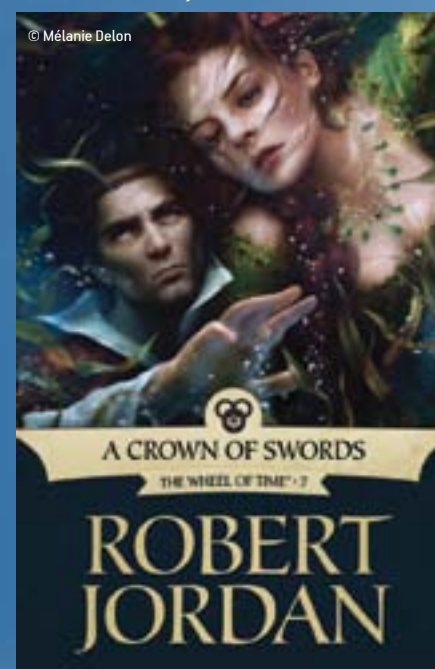
© Benjamin Ang

### 14. PAINT UNDERWATER SCENES

MÉLANIE DELON  
www.melaniedelon.com

Following a detailed brief, Mélanie

Delon ([www.melaniedelon.com](http://www.melaniedelon.com)) interpreted two characters in order to create a jacket for Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time* series.



© Mélanie Delon

■ **Sketch first** Underwater scenes are always complicated; the body and the clothes react differently. I tend to do some very quick paper sketches before starting a painting, to see the construction and composition, then I start with some basic colour blocks in Photoshop.

■ **Start simple** I don't work with the details first; I always start very simply and add other elements during the painting process. Then I slowly refine everything, adding the light and shadow along with more and more details. This part is the most time consuming.

■ **Tweak brushes** Brush settings are vitals for me. My favourite is the Opacity Jitter; I use it a lot for everything, and it brings lovely colour variations and great texture to brush strokes. I'm also very fond of the Wet Edges settings, as they lend a painted feeling to the brush strokes.



### 15. BUILD UP COLOUR

MINÉ JONKER  
www.studiomuti.co.za

Miné Jonker from Studio

Muti ([www.studiomuti.co.za](http://www.studiomuti.co.za)) teamed up with illustrator Elsie Wessels ([www.blackfan.co.za](http://www.blackfan.co.za)) to create an editorial artwork for the cover of *Global Trade Review*, a UK-based financial magazine. The particular magazine issue they worked on dealt with the resources in Africa, and the client wanted an image to depict this.

The final design fittingly captures a sense of chance through the playing cards and cleverly fits in the idea of diamonds and resources, along with the vibrant colours you'd associate with the continent. To create the piece, Miné says she approached it as you would a traditional painting. "I do most of my painting with the Brush tool, set to a low opacity. I then slowly build up the colours, as you would in a traditional painting with actual paint. This gives the colours lots of depth. I also use lots of subtle textures over each other."



© Studio Muti

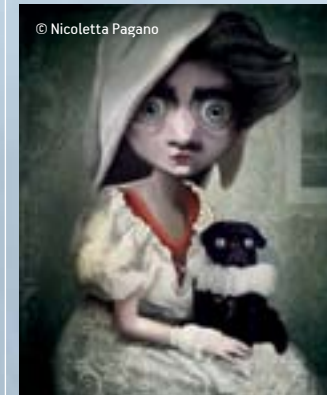
### 16. PAINTING IN OIL

NICOLETTA PAGANO  
www.nicolettapagano.com

Tasked with creating a work for a private collection that is focussed on the traditional character Pulcinella, better known as Punch, Nicoletta Pagano ([www.nicolettapagano.com](http://www.nicolettapagano.com)) started off digitally and then just kept on going. Her work demonstrates the skill of using digital tools to recreate the look and feel of a traditional oil painting.

"I was asked to interpret this character from the Italian tradition and so I chose to paint *Portrait of a Young Mother*. I created an image of a woman with the physical traits of the renowned Neapolitan personality. It was so exciting to render women's clothes of the sixteenth century, taking care of the details and finishes. The piece was supposed to be oil painted, but I started to make the shapes digitally and then, continuing

to work on it, it remained digital until the end. Printed and pasted on a board, now it's displayed alongside oil paintings, looking great and holding its own. It was vital I created the right atmosphere by superimposing many different textures and shades. I tried to create a traditional painting technique by 'dirtying' the colour, using blend modes and brushes created as pencil marks."



© Nicoletta Pagano





**17. PAINT FEATHERS**  
DR LUKAS BREZAK  
www.surgeryminor.com

When it comes to tackling the painting of feathered friends, Dr Lukas Brezak (www.surgeryminor.com) recommends using reality as a source and then applying your own unique style to it.

"I'm always searching for the right method," says Dr Brezak, "and I look at a lot of bird images. My technique is to draw texture in feather shapes and then layer, edit opacity, Multiply and add layer effects. I use just few tools: some basic brushes, the lasso and eraser. Mainly, this piece was about drawing, and over many, many layers. I think the total was about 150. The final colouring made it a black and white illustration. My inspiration mostly comes from things like history, people, art, music, the universe, my inner self, the future and the past... and it comes the least from my present reality. I was inspired here by the mysterious natures of owls and the moon."



© Dr Lukas Brezak

**19. KEEP WORKING DIGITALLY**  
ALEXANDER DRAUDE  
www.draude.com

Alexander Draude (www.draude.com) is a freelance illustrator for computer games, children's books, comics and magazines. He created this illustration for a book aimed at young children that teaches kids the history of a small town in the heart of Germany. The book is called *Entdeckerwege für Kinder*, which roughly translates into *Paths of Exploration for Kids*. Since it's an educational book, Alexander had to work to tight specifications in the illustrations he produced: "The houses in the images are, for example, spot-on architecture from the place it's set."

Alexander says he does prefer paper, but for client work he keeps everything digital. "Photoshop helps me a lot when it comes to masking areas of an image, and final colour adjustments or details, of course," he says. On the advice front, Alexander says that if he's feeling rusty, it helps to do small speed paintings to keep his mind working digitally.

**18. AUTHENTICITY OVER PERFECTION**  
BENJAMIN ANG  
www.benjaminang.com

This *Super Street Fighter IV* artwork was created by Benjamin Ang (www.benjaminang.com), who was influenced just as much by fighting games as he was by comics and cartoons.

"Here, I wanted to make a royal rumble of my favourite characters while attempting a 'rawer' painting style," explains Benjamin. "I tend to use the Burn tool for a quick greyscale paint-over to get an idea of values and lighting. Moving to colour, I keep the use of Photoshop tools to a minimum by playing only with the Brush opacity. I find this more organic and it trains my brain to think in terms of colours and lighting, as opposed to which shortcuts I can take advantage of. Don't spend too much time polishing one artwork: move on to a new piece and continue to improve with each one you attempt. It doesn't have to be perfect – it just has to be 'you'."



© Benjamin Ang



© Alexander Draude

**20. ADD TRIBAL PATTERNING**  
MINÉ JONKER  
www.studiomuti.co.za

Creating a digital painting that looks great on all types of accessories – from iPhone cases to pillows – is no easy task. This project by Studio Muti (www.studiomuti.co.za) does just that with a bright, flourishing design showing off intricate tribal patterns and an 'Africa Madonna'.

"I wanted to do a super-detailed iconic African figure with lots of flat patterning," Miné Jonker tells us, "combined with photorealistic painting. I used elements of South African tribal culture and referenced various religious icons". Miné recommends learning to use as many different brushes as possible to help you achieve your effects. "Learn to use your shortcuts and masks; it will save you a lot of time and allow you to be flexible. Also, try to keep all of your layers separate and use adjustment layers instead of changing colours on the actual layers."



© Studio Muti



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