



# Painting as Meditation

By Janet Hammerton

There are lots of different methods of meditation and I have explored a few over the years. I have found that meditation has carried me through both the most profound joys and through the darkest hours of my life.

**" I have found that painting helps to anchor me in my quest for a deeper peace and awareness of the world around me and so I include painting here as a meditative pastime and an aid to well-being."**

I have always liked art and visual images. For me using visual imagery is my preferred means of expression. I find that for wellbeing painting from nature can be as good as a set meditation, being restful and full of peace. When I work now I can acknowledge that I am still aiming to create an image but I can concentrate on the fact that I am doing so from a point

of stillness. I know I am going to somehow apply checks and balances to aim for something pleasing but I must also be able to let go and know that a clever result in a frame is not the goal. I call this a meditative process because it grounds me in awareness and teaches me inner patience. If the result is pleasing then that is a plus point but often it is not in itself that good.

Many years ago I spent a powerfully moving weekend painting to uncover subconscious thoughts as a therapeutic process. This involved working experientially with a group of artists and materials to break down preconditioned drawing habits. The set up included containment in deep uninterrupted space of safety, meditating on a seed thought and dancing. When the group finally took the materials, the crayons, the paints and the brushes to paper we simply allowed a dance to occur on the paper intuitively without critical self -

assessment. It's hard not to have a preconceived intent when faced with a blank piece of white paper. It can lead to a deep welling up of feelings of inadequacy and confusion at ones perceived lack of talent.

I prefer to paint images that are deliberately full of light and colour (from and in the light). I have found that It can be a good beginning to lay down a dark ground with light areas and bring the light through from within those illumined patches. I can then sit with those initial washes and patches until something I might want to mark them with comes to me. This is a way of ensuring I am not hung up on a fixed image, resisting the urge to faithfully re-create an object or a landscape.



**A small abstract can be very meditative in this sense and bring a lot of joy in the process. It is something everyone can play with doing and is very peaceful.**

I find that because I trained in surface pattern design it is a great challenge to me to add true depth and shadow to an image but then that can work in my favour because in the end I just want to create a piece that somehow captures colour and that illuminates and shines by itself so I focus less on my representative technique.

You can make an abstract based on colour and texture, light and dark, using almost any artist materials and you can play with building a pattern in 2 or 3 dimensions.

In my time as designer I thought it was essential to have a studio and produce pieces to order but now I feel that it is much more important to just allow myself to be fully present in any environment, to be a gentle observer.

I also know I really need to be at peace with my materials and able to let go of my expectations as much as my mind allows me. I rarely have time to do much these days except sketch and for this reason I prefer to work with natural finds, flowers, leaves, shells or nature's patterns so that I am not straining my intellect for content and can enjoy the art of discovery with little immediate hope of completion or result.

Whatever the outcome, whether I manage to do anything worthwhile or not, what I remember is the light moving on the trees outside, the rough feel of the carpet under my knees, the dust particles dancing lazily in the silent air, a faint rustle, a scent of oil pastel, a timelessness a oneness and not the picture I dreamt of itself at all.

Much of what I have made in the past 12 years ended up in a sketch book and has never been shared with an audience but it is still special because it is pregnant with the sense of what is, what it might be or what it might have been and also of what was at the time it was made.



The picture above painted 15 years ago represents a time of well-being and of joy with time to spend painting a flower border for a textile design.

Focusing on painting can be very grounding and probably the less time we have for it the more we need to do it but it can be frustrating too. I have had to set up in a wide variety of different environments, a busy shared house full of people, a shared studio, a corner of my bedroom just anywhere to find peace to sit in. I have no easel, no special desk, no particular chair for painting but I do need to observe attentively before starting using all my senses and not just the seeing eye so I have to find some position where I can be uninterrupted at least for a while.

Eyes closed may well be best way of just sensing the moment and the surroundings and materials, waiting to see what arises, which medium to use, which colours to favour before starting. Often these days that is as far as I get. Finding some small slot of ime without being disturbed can be a real challenge.

**Painting has been a way for me of excusing myself from the bustle of family life. I discovered when I was a child that when I was painting I appeared to others to be actively involved in “doing” something (a hobby!) so I was left alone with it.**

I knew I spent a large proportion of my time just meditating and creating some boundaries from myself in a difficult family environment and I know now that becoming an artist was a way of retaining that acknowledgement of the need for personal space in an over busy world.

Painting allowed me to be fully immersed in a place and time (imaginary or real) and to sit with my experience and process it. It also makes one love the small things around one and not always be striving for more.



People have said to me  
“Art is not meditation  
Janet. Focusing on the  
breath is meditation,  
sitting with the pain is  
meditation” I would say  
there’s plenty of both of  
those in painting.

It's not all joy just as meditation is not all joy, but art can improve well-being if practised often enough and without over attachment to every result.

I hope you will be encouraged to enjoy your own process of art and creativity as a path to wellbeing (even if like me finding the space proves difficult) because even the joy of intention brings peaceful thoughts.

**Janet Hammerton**

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