



USA

IN THIS 3 PART SERIES **AMY SANDERS** GUIDES US THROUGH HER CREATIVE PROCESS

**PART ONE**  
THE TACTFUL USE OF PHOTOS AS TOOLS AND WHY THEY WILL NEVER STAND SHOULDER TO SHOULDER WITH PAINTINGS

## PHOTOS: ALWAYS REAL, BUT NEVER REALISM

I am a realistic painter, and proud to say so. My passion, (which most emphatically does not need to be your passion), is in the details—the light, contrast, color and intricacy that is placed before me by nature, (and sometimes by people). And yes, I work from photographs, a lot, and I'm not ashamed of that either.

I'm a pastelist by preference, and lugging pastels is just not for me. Many people just love the experience of "en plein air" painting, but not me. Like many artists, I work a 'day' job, and so my painting hours are limited. I want to paint when I want to paint, and that includes evenings, crummy weather weekends and hot, humid, buggy summer days (when I'd rather be in the water, than painting it). I also love to paint the ocean, which is an impatient sitter, and inclined to unexpectedly throw lots of surplus water your way. To top it off, I dropped my open pastel box once in the sand, and that particular experience was all I needed to become a passionate studio painter.

That's not to say I don't love to be out, even on crummy weather weekends, and especially when the ocean is lobbing water my way. I just don't want to paint out there – I want to 'be' out there, (walking, sitting and contemplating etc., often for hours on end), and my camera is the tool I use to carry my art back to the comfort of my studio.



So rises that persistent argument of using or not using photos. Some folk say painting from photos is just technical bravado, but has no substance. Others say painting from photos is a valuable tool and artists should be able to avail themselves of any tool they wish. Oh, what I wouldn't give to stop this argument once and for all, (though I hold no illusions of doing so). My take on this is simple: use photographs if you wish, and don't if you don't.

Your art is about your passion. If your passion is expressed with realism, with or without the use of photographs, go for it. If your passion is expressed with impressionism, expressionism, abstractionism, etc., with or without the use of photographs, go for that. Go for what suits you. If someone doesn't like that, they don't have to buy it. If they criticize, what do you care? Plenty of other folks will love it, whatever you do. But remember, of foremost importance is that you love it. It's a big art world out there, and there's plenty of room for all of us.

### A tool and not a creation

I see the camera as a tool, one of many in my studio - lights, gloves, pastels, computers, etc. While I usually use photographs (or a series) for reference, I feel a richness of emotion and the spectacular beauty of a place when I look at my painting, that I never feel when I look at my photographs. A tool is a tool. It's how we use those tools that expresses our passions, and makes our work ours. We'll probably never all agree on which 'tools' we find acceptable, but maybe we can agree not to criticize one another for our varied choices? →



**Waiting for the Big One, pastel, 12 x 10" (30 x 26cm)**

I love to paint children dancing at the edge of the waves. However, finding children in a good composition is hard, so I pull kids from separate photos and combine them. Here I combined children from 2 photos, shifted their positions, simplified their suits and adjusted their shadows in the water. I had to remember, too, the blond child would leave a shadow on the girl.



**After Our Storm, pastel, 11 x 11" (27 x 27cm)**

This piece was about the unique light that burst forth as a squall passed just to the south of me. The composition presented itself with no needed help from me. In the original photo, there is more muted light, and the incredible richness of the sand formations under the water are barely visible due to sky reflections. I raised the contrast, enriched the colors to emphasize the beauty, and took out my dog.



## my art in the making Offshore Wind

pastel, 9.5 x 9.5" (24 x 24cm)



I have literally thousands of photos of waves and live only a half mile from the sea. Yet, I never seem to tire of immersing myself in the intricacies of the swells, the windswept lacy foam patterns, and the sheer power in the water. I can watch the ocean for hours on end without tiring, and I can paint it forever. When I'm painting such a scene, I am fully there in my mind - feelings, smells, sounds, etc. I aim to hold that feeling, while capturing the massive energy of the scene.

### 1 cropping and adjusting

The reference shows swells from an offshore storm. I cropped an area of interest, and drew it onto the surface. The sky has been eliminated, giving the appearance of moving the water closer.

### 2 dark to light

Using horizontal strokes, (direction of the water), I laid in the darkest color first (deep blues), and then put progressively lighter layers on top. This image shows that process, working from left to right.



### 3 taking to the water

Having completed the distant water, I've moved to the far wave and the water between it and the front wave. The darker under-layer shows here, and the beginning of foam on the rear wave.



### 4 suggesting movement

The middle water is now nearly complete. I only suggested the movement in the lower portion because the spray of the front wave will cover it. ▶



## 5 the front wave

Here I'm beginning to layer in the front wave, running the strokes in the direction the energy in the water is moving. This water is thinner and vertical to reflect less sky, so it's greener.



## 6 white water and variations

Whites and pale blues and greens are used to layer in the white water. I vary the pressure as well as the color, to give the impression of varied surface textures and lots of movement.



## 7 the choppy look

I finish with the layering in of the front white water. There's a bit more blue here, because the water is horizontal again. Varied pressure, strokes and colors give it the choppy look I'm after.



## Final painting





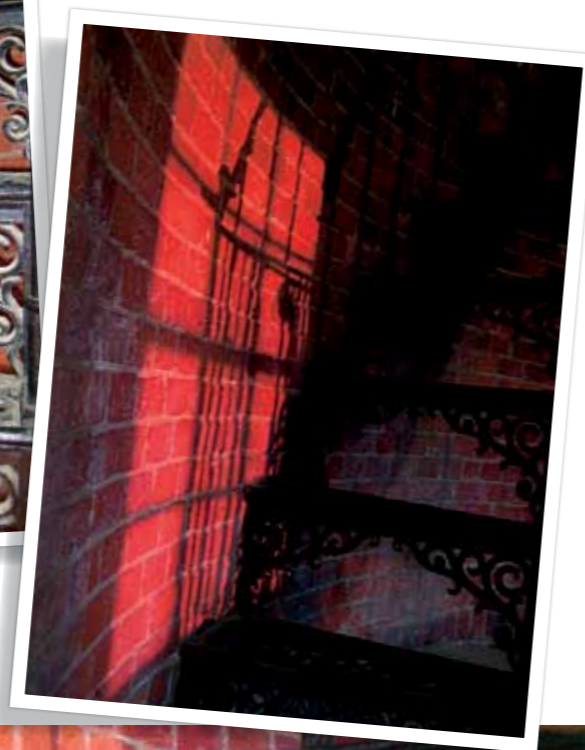
→ That being said, people will often look at my work and gasp that it looks just like a photograph, which I believe is meant as a compliment and I take as such. Because I've never seen them gasp at the accompanying photographs, I know they see the differences, but lack the ability to put the artistic difference into words. So, what exactly are those differences?

#### Understanding the difference

Photographs have a flatness to them and a sharpness to the edges - things in the distance are just as sharp, and just as rich in color and detail, as things closer to the camera - that makes them clearly photographs. Most of my paintings are highly realistic for sure, but the edges are softer, their colors are richer, (most vividly noticeable in the shadows or darker areas), and there is more depth to them than one can find in a photograph. Things in the distance have much smoother edges, less detail, and a bluer color, more typical of how the eye sees, than a camera.

When working from a photo, think about what you want to capture that the photo did not, and adjust accordingly. An example can be seen in 'Sunset Highland Light: The Keeper's Stairs.' I climb that lighthouse often, and love that intricate iron work which is present in only the fifth set of stairs. Across from these stairs is a window, right on the floor. At a certain time of year the sun sets right through that window and shines a fiery red light across the edge of the stairs onto the textured interior brick wall. You can clearly see how no photo would catch that. Expose for the sunset on the wall, and everything else becomes black. Expose to see the detail of the brick and stairs, and the flash eliminates the sunset. Combine the two and you have it.

With water (note the demonstration), I crop to make a nice composition, and then vary strokes and color to create the weather I want, and the distance that the viewer is from the scene. In the demonstration, I made it a brighter day by intensifying the blues and greens, giving the impression that the water is reflecting sky and lots more light than it was. I was not standing in the water



**Sunset Highland Light: The Keeper's Stairs, pastel, 12 x 8.5" (30 x 21cm)**

I loved how the light was falling through a low window at sunset and leaving fiery red highlights on the intricate wrought iron and highly textured bricks, but no photo could capture this. I took one with no flash to get the sunset pattern on the wall, and where the highlights would strike the stairs, and one with a flash for the detail on the stairs, and put them together by adjusting the values.



when I took the photograph, and rarely am, though the final piece brings that water very close to the viewer.

To create a painting from a photo, in addition to altering values, (contrast) and distances, (through use of stroke in pastel, color and level of detail), you can richen or change colors ('After Our Storm' and 'Daphne'), which provide rich and multiple layers of varied color, or crop and change for composition (as in the demonstration, and 'Waiting for the Big One'), including eliminating distractions or unwanted elements. Remember when you make changes that involve pulling elements from multiple photos, to keep track of consistency in direction of light and shadows ('Waiting for the Big One').

**Fort Hill Summer, oil, 8 x 8" (20 x 20cm)**

This is a beautiful location but the photo could not do it justice on this day because of the humidity. The haze flattened the light, and obscured the ocean beyond. To make matters worse, the park sprayed some invasive vegetation causing the unsightly brown. I increased the contrast and saturation of color (lost the brown), put in my beautiful ocean and added the flowers that were there a few weeks before.



The only rule? Always work from your own photographs - a must if you sell or enter competitions with your work. You can play and practice with others' photos, but you can't sell. The only exception to this rule for me is on rare occasions when a buyer commissions a pet portrait. On those occasions, I will work from provided photographs from the buyer only. Pets are timid with people they don't know trying to photograph them, but I always ask for a series, with notes as to the buyer's favorites and why.

In conclusion, remember that your art is yours. It should reflect your passions, and your desires. Follow your passion, do what you love and let the rest fall into place. □



#### about the artist

Amy K. Sanders is an award winning artist and Signature Member of the Pastel Society of America (PSA). She considers pastel to be her primary medium, although originally she worked in watercolors and was a member of the Connecticut Watercolor Society. She still paints occasionally in watercolors, acrylics and oils, but she finds pastels allow her to capture more expressively the beauty and depth of the scenes that she is drawn to paint.

Amy is largely a self-taught artist. She studied with outstanding art teacher, Ron Parent, for several years and has also painted under guest artists at Truro's Castle Hill Center for the Arts. Her artistic style creates velvety, richly detailed paintings.

Amy's paintings have been sold in a series of auctions to benefit non-profit organizations, and are in a variety of private collections. She has exhibited in galleries in Connecticut and on the Cape, and has been represented by the Addison Art Gallery of Orleans, Massachusetts, since 1998.

**www.amyksanders.com**  
Addison Art Gallery, Orleans  
**www.addisonart.com/sanders.html**