

# Inksmith

INFORMATION FOR ARTISTS  
FROM DANIEL SMITH

## *A Quest for Expression*

by Stella Canfield

**W**e all admire young children for their ability to paint and draw despite the often inexpert forms and lines. What attracts us to their artwork? Without doubt it is their unfailingly honest expression. Children express themselves with complete lack of intimidation.

As we grow and learn, somewhere along the way (maybe with “better” understanding of social etiquette) our fears grow too: fear of not being understood, fear of failure, fear of not belonging, fear of rejection, etc. We lose the courage to fully express our emotions.

Go to a high school and ask how many of the students paint and draw. How did so many of these previously gifted artists lose their talent? They really have not—but they have become intimidated; uncertain that the way they are doing it is “right.” Those who persevere to learn a new set of skills can overcome the anxieties and fear of expression with well-learned behavior that fits artistic standards.

The courage to express our emotions in art as well as in life affords us vast realms of communication that are otherwise missing. Yet, to express emotions is a responsibility because we affect the people around us as we touch lives.

So, how do we express emotions? What tools do we need? How far do we go? I will be on the quest for those answers as long as I live.

I often ask myself what it is that I want to achieve, what is my objective in painting? I know that I cannot compete with nature. I know how insignificant I am, incapable of creating the unsurpassable beauty inherent in nature. Yet, I love the world around me, the people, and the creatures, and I want to depict them. I could never create a non-objective work of art as I am

“stuck” on all this beauty around me. But wouldn't it be an act of hubris to attempt to show the viewer what she already knows?

I need clarity and goals. I do not want to be a watercolorist; I want to be an artist! To achieve that I must not simply paint things in watercolor but build paintings capable of communicating with audiences. Painting is much like composing a piece of music, with the artist being both composer and conductor. Each stroke of the brush

is a note and I must know not only the emotion that I want to project in my painting but also the resonance it will evoke in the eye and heart of the viewer. That is why I must be emotionally as well as intellectually involved with my subject. I have to learn my subject, collect the facts in my head and my heart, see it, hear it, smell it and feel it! For that reason I paint *plein-air*, from my own sketches and photographs or from my imagination, but never from references alien to my personal experience. If I have never known the subject, I cannot connect emotionally with it and therefore cannot express its vital content in my painting. Mere technical knowledge will not suffice to produce a painting that satisfies me. The audience would also sense that emotional deficiency.



*Down Time*, watercolor by Stella Canfield.

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*Morning Catch*



*Spring Splash*



*Midday Clearing*

My brushes, paints and paper are my physical tools. They are like the blacksmith's hammer. He knows how, when and where to strike the iron. I must know my tools as well as he knows his. That's why I play! Playing is my beginning. It is also my best teacher. How my new brush works, how that yummy new Daniel Smith color I just added to my palette behaves on the paper, how it mixes with the other colors to achieve the result I am looking for, how much water is the perfect ratio with the pigment on my brush—all of this I learn by playing, not by "painting a picture." Knowing my tools is essential. The cost of the paper and paints that I use in my play is the best spent money in my journey as an artist. The tools alone, however, cannot take me to that finished painting full of emotional expression that I wish to communicate to the viewer.

### Here are a few of my methods

When I get into my studio I need to escape the pressing thoughts of the day and call the muse to be there for me in the few hours I steal to do my art in my busy schedule.

To get in the "zone" (some know it as the right brain), I go back to playing, like a child! I was not taught in school how to play or read about it in a book. It developed naturally, out of necessity. I don't truly notice when I get in the "zone," but I know the painting happens then and not when I think and worry about what to paint and where to begin. My greatest pleasure is learning through playing just as we did as children, free of judgment and pressure. This is also how I excite myself about painting—without even realizing I am working on a painting, without even remembering how I chose the subject. What fun! One day I will paint seriously—until then I play and listen to music.

I want to express my feelings about what I see and what I love. With busy lives, most people seldom take the time to truly learn to see. Artists allow everyone to see beyond the ordinary. We are blessed to have eyes in our hearts! How many times do our family members or our friends wonder where we see that color in the sky or the red in the greenery? Painting gives me the ability to communicate what I see with my heart.

We are surrounded by gifts we take for granted. The best of them is light. Without light there is no life at all. And light is a feast for the artist! Light is my first and greatest element for expressing emotion, therefore I feel that understanding light is essential. It is so easy to become wrapped up in concerns about linear perspective and lose sight of atmospheric perspective. How does light create and affect forms and local tone? How does light create perspective and mood in a painting?

I have learned to know six lights: 1. The local color in light; 2. The gradation from light to dark (going away from the light);

3. The local color in shade; 4. The reflected light in the shade; 5. The dark under the object; 6. The cast shadow. Of these, reflected light is the most beautiful to me. I revel in the light that springs from every object to affect all surfaces around it, up and down, left and right, that hides under the eaves of roofs, the trunks of trees, the brim of a hat, that sparkles on the walls of the shadowed building, lights up the shadow of the model's back dressed in that yellow blouse and shimmers under our feet walking beneath the tree.

Seeing and understanding light is vital to my work. I believe that the key to expressing emotion is the careful consideration of the aura around the subject, whether a tree or a young girl's face. The air around us is substance, not emptiness. It is light diffused through the moisture and dust particles in the air that produces beautiful hues. I like to paint that light and use it to create connecting shapes and color



*Caffe Centrale*

between the background and my subject. It creates the mood.

For the rest of a painting I draw on my knowledge of the Seven Elements of Art. I have simplified them to four—Line, Value, Color, and Shape and Space as one—since I cannot separate Shape from Space. Direction I combine with every other element. Texture I use to ensure the variety of Value, Color and Shape/Space in order to escape monotony. So there they are, only four!

My life was always too complicated so I learned to simplify. That led me to learn to be selective, too. From all the elements, I chose Line and Color to be my "best buddies" as I love the sensuality of Line and the emotion of Color. Through these two I also achieve the dynamic, the movement that I enjoy in a painting and that also helps me achieve my goals.



Waiting for the Tides



Rhapsody #3



Storm Brewing

That doesn't mean that I disregard the other elements. I treat them respectfully. As closely as I may use the values, from five to seven or two to six (on 1-to-10 scale), I treat them with consideration. Shape/Space is also essential in achieving variety and gradation in my design.

I've also simplified the principles of Design. I cannot use them on their own, so I marry them to every element I use to build my paintings. Unity, Dominance, Repetition, Variety, Balance, Harmony, Gradation and Conflict are all achieved by knowing how to use the elements as my building blocks. Again, I cannot separate them from each other or from the elements by which they are constructed. They go hand in hand.

The principle I regard as most important is Unity. I strive for unity from the beginning of every painting. Connecting shapes through washes and soft edges, gradating values, varying color temperature—warm and cool, understanding dominance and conflict...these are my tools to achieve unity. It is difficult for me to put the painting together at the end if I have not worked to unite it from the beginning. After all, to express emotion I have to consider the overall mood and not the single object painted separately.

*Light is my first and greatest element for expressing emotion, therefore I feel that understanding light is essential.*

I want the eye of the viewer to travel all over the painting, from edge to edge, to come back and discover something important, then travel again and find more. I would like the observer to imagine beyond the piece of paper

and to look for a long time until he becomes infatuated with the painting and wishes to look at it forever, to own it and wander in it at home. Then I have achieved my goal: to communicate my feeling about the subject I painted to the viewer. I've also earned compensation to pay for my supplies, though in no way do I want that aspect of the process to become a burden.

This discussion summarizes how I approach painting—if you are a beginner, you may not understand it all. But my ambition in this article, as with a painting, is simply to motivate you to want to know more. If you already know all of this but have still read this article to the end, I invite you to play and remember how wonderful children feel being free and un-intimidated. Failure exists neither in art nor in life; it is all experience from which we learn. We can only get better. With the courage and knowledge to express emotion, our art has life!

## HAPPY PLAYING!

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by Stella Canfield

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