

Working sketchbooks

In the first of his three-part series on oil painting techniques, **Robert E Wells** encourages us to keep our sketchbooks fluid and use them as a flexible, timeless resource for later paintings

Sketchbooks have always been a vital resource for my working process as an oil painter. I try to make sure that the information collected is kept in a random, casual format, so as not to spend disproportionate time on any one image, and so that it can be seen as a flexible resource.

To make sure the books are used to their maximum efficiency, I prepare them in a specific manner. I often have books produced in batches of ten or 15. A random number of pages are covered with a thin coat of PVA glue. After drying, which is usually within minutes, a series of oil washes are applied, usually from paint left over from a *plein-air* palette. There is no definitive number of washes applied to any one surface, but due to drying times I would try to cover as many pages as possible in any one book to allow it to fill gradually. This is particularly useful as it gives me many variations of surface colours and textures, depending on how the paint is applied, and encourages



This is one of my many durable sketchbooks. It's handmade using responsibly sourced leather, hand stitched containing 140lb (300gsm) Not paper. This sketchbook is used as a basis for many of my paintings. The contents vary from page-to-page and are not necessarily connected by specific themes. They are however called upon as a reference on a regular basis and serve as a starting point for many large studio works

the pages to be used at random throughout the book at any time when ideas are being explored. This can be achieved by standing the book upright with the pages separated by pencils or any other equipment that will stop the pages touching. It is imperative that the surfaces of the pages do not come into contact with each other as there is a tendency for the pages to glue themselves together.

The application of the oil washes is slightly different. Due to the drying time of the oil, it is possible to allow the pages to occasionally come into contact with each other as long as they are not allowed to stay like that when the oil starts to dry. Occasionally allowing the oil surfaces to touch can actually have a positive effect as the surface may become mottled and tones bleed into each other. This can create a random effect that cannot be replicated by conscious attempts.

Keep it flexible

There is no time frame for any one book to be finished, and there may even be a case whereby some books may never reach a conclusion. Much of this depends on organic growth. It is nice to know that they will remain as practical resources for many years. A problem many people experience is the fixation on any one image, that tempts the painter to keep reworking unnecessarily. This can have a negative effect as it is occupying attention that could be split across multiple books. My suggestion would be to leave anything that isn't working, and to work on it at a further date. This can be allowed for differing textures, which will be looked at in a following article that will focus on *pentimento*.

Each sketchbook is not confined to any particular medium. Since some pages are completely blank (without any preparation at all) they can be used for watercolour or pencil studies, which otherwise would not be easy to apply over the PVA surfaces. I like to allow the



▲ Oil sketch study of a friend's husband whilst out walking, on pre-prepared 140lb (300gsm) paper, 6×8¼in (15×21cm). This may be used as a reference for further works



▲ *Two Siblings, North Yorkshire Moors*

Completed pages from my
A5 sketchbook, painted on
140lb (300gsm) paper



▲ *Chiara on the South Downs National Park*



▲ *Two Boys Painted on Holiday*

▼ *Two Unknown Figures in Eastbourne*



Robert's sketchbook materials

- Handmade leather-bound A5 sketchbook.
- 140lb (300gsm) Bockingford paper.
- PVA glue.
- Oil paint (Cranfield titanium white, cadmium red and yellow, French ultramarine, etc.).
- Palette knives/old credit cards.
- Flat bristle brushes, such as ProArte Sablene.



◀ *Dungeness Power Station*, oil study, 11¾×8¼in (30×21cm). This portrait-shaped oil study was produced on a recent visit to the site. The area is well-known for its very unusual atmosphere, and the study was an attempt to capture atmosphere rather than specific content

book to achieve maximum flexibility by the use of any medium or technique that may be appropriate to the visual record I am trying to create. As the surfaces are prepared at random with blank pages also randomly dispersed through the books, this helps to increase variation from page to page.

The random storage of information is very useful as each page can be viewed in its own right, without being related specifically to anything around it. Other information is also stored in this manner, which can be anything from a collage, the collection of articles of interest, and the rotation of either notes to myself or as points of interest raised by other people. There are even some books that are entitled 'death and disaster series', which have nothing but newspaper articles and related texts covering events in any one year. ITA

► A5 oil sketch of my daughter walking on Camber Sands one evening last winter. I was struck by a sense of isolation in this specific composition. As with many of the other works, it may form a reference point in future works



CHALLENGE

- Use any sketchbook (old or new) with six pages randomly prepared with PVA glue. Leave to dry for one to two hours making sure the pages don't touch each other. Using any range of oil paints, apply a series of random washes. Allow the pages to close and then reopen (to create a mottled effect). Then, leave the pages to dry whilst being retained separately. Dry overnight, or until the surface is sufficiently dry.
- Using any subject of interest, create a painting (no matter the complexity) over each page. It is important at this stage to try and use each page to the same degree. Do not be tempted to attempt to finish any one work, but rather explore the possibilities of each one as you go along. Don't spend longer than ten minutes on each page. Allow to dry overnight or until the paint is sufficiently dry to allow for further coats.
- Repeat the same process with each page for a couple of days, again spending a limited amount of time on each one. On the final day, look at each page as an overview and apply any finishing touches. It is vital not to spend any more than the minimum amount of time per page.
- When the pages are dry, leave the book for any given time ranging from days to weeks. This will allow you to look at what has been achieved with a more objective view. Select what you consider to be the most interesting page, and email your images to admin@tapc.co.uk to be shared on PaintersOnline and on our social media pages.



Robert E. Wells

is a multiple award-winning artist born in Yorkshire. He is known for his cityscape paintings as well as rural landscapes and figurative works. A member of the New English Art Club and the Royal Society of British Artists, he regularly exhibits his work in solo shows, mainly in the UK. His book, *Robert E. Wells In Perspective* was published in 2018. Contact Robert at <https://www.robertewells.com>

Next month Robert will look at painting surfaces and tell us how he employs the use of his electric sander!