

Artist  
to  
Artist:  
**Jeanne  
Dobie**

This renowned artist and teacher offers advice on using color and learning from every experience, professional and otherwise.

**Watercolor:** You are noted for your effective use of color, and especially for your instructional book, *Making Color Sing*. How did you arrive at your personal approach to selecting a palette and using color?

**Jeanne Dobie:** As a mother and wife with five children, I did not have time to paint as many paintings as my art friends. I decided to concentrate instead upon improving my art and becoming a better artist. I set up challenges for myself, such as painting only half of the paper and making the other, untouched half describe the painted half and creating various light patterns from the same subject.

Most of all, I enjoyed pursuing ways to make colors glow, or vibrate. I thought of colors as having personalities like people: they can do some things well and other things not as well. In my classes I gave colors memorable terms to help students identify them and to think of how they were using them, such as “oceanic” (my word for high-powered) color, “stain and remain” colors, “set-your-teeth-on-edge” accents, and greens mixed without blue (nicknamed “Jeanne’s



greens” by the students). I like to see paintings where the color is personal and does not smack the viewer as being right out of a tube.

Additionally, I was conducting overseas workshops I called “Paint-escapes,” and I wanted to reduce the palette to a basic workable group of colors. The pigments had to intermix cleanly with one another. Therefore, a warm and a cool of each color was necessary. They also needed to be able to capture a wide range

**Twilight**

2007, watercolor, 20 x 29.  
Collection the artist. Here,  
Dobie tweaked the jewelike  
colors to intensify the late  
afternoon sun effects.



of atmospheres of different countries (delicate shadows on whitewashed buildings in Portugal or stained glass darks of fiords in Norway). I called my palette a pure pigment palette. Students found it almost impossible to mix mud!

**W:** Why do you think readers have responded so strongly to your book?

**JD:** *Making Color Sing* is about creating a personal interpretation of the world. My book is a guide to putting your ideas together via color into well-constructed paintings. Color, I believe, can be as important as composition when designing a painting. Color is the emotional response to a subject. Composition is the analytical response. When you combine the two, you have an unbeatable painting!

To me, creativity lies not in a watercolor technique but in the mind of the artist. How you orchestrate shapes, values, and colors into a painting is your creativity.

Artists who cannot attend an art school can give themselves an equivalent education with a good book, and I

tried to give them one as a constant companion, and to refer to for future growth.

**W:** In your workshops, what problems—in terms of using color—do you see most often and what is your advice?

**JD:** Too often a student wants an easy formula. The easier the formula, the less you use your mind. The less you use your mind, the less creative your painting becomes. Mixing with my pure pigment palette yields different mixtures each time. Because it is almost impossible to mix the same color the same shade each time, the painting becomes full of a variety of color automatically.

Another problem occurs with the student who adheres to a triad or formula. If there is a special jewellike color in a subject, why not let it sing instead of compromising it into a compatible triad color. Formulas produce safe, but ho-hum paintings.

For the timid students, my advice is to take an old painting with dead colors and repaint it using the pure pigment



ABOVE

**Good Morning, Provence!**

2004, watercolor, 21 x 29.  
Collection the artist.

LEFT

**Three Tourists**

2004, watercolor, 20 x 29.  
Collection the artist.

OPPOSITE PAGE

**Aegean Shadows**

1993, watercolor, 21 x 29.  
Collection Carol Allen.

The sun-drenched effects of this painting and *Colors of an Island Evening* exemplify Dobie's work when she lived in the Florida Keys, where she was strongly influenced by the bright sunlight.

BELOW

**Katrina**

2007, watercolor, 21 x 29. Collection the artist. In this piece Dobie wanted to express the explosive power of a violent storm. Notice how the compositional elements radiate from the center.



OPPOSITE PAGE ABOVE

**Papilion Winter**

2005, watercolor, 21 x 29. Collection Mr. and Mrs. Richard Seidel. Dobie describes this as a "vision" painting that conveys the concept of rebirth.

OPPOSITE PAGE BELOW

**Ice Palace**

2005, watercolor, 21 x 29. Collection Mr. and Mrs. Matthew Robinson. This scene is purely imaginary, based on Dobie's daughter's descriptions of an iceberg in Newfoundland and the artist's memories of icebergs in Norway, where she often led workshops.



palette and enjoy comparing the two paintings. Or use the glazing method, which will cover the paper and establish your light pattern for a solid beginning.

To all students, don't fear disasters. If you are constantly painting good paintings one after another, you may not be growing. Question yourself if you are staying within your own boundaries.

**W:** What advice can you offer about selecting a workshop instructor?

**JD:** Ultimately, you need to work on your own. Select an instructor who will not infringe on your way of painting, one who will give you the knowledge and tools to continue to develop as an artist long after the workshop has ended.

**W:** What are the primary sources of inspiration for your paintings?

**JD:** The interactions of colors or shapes, as well as color vibrations, always catch my eye. The scene is usually ordinary, but

I enjoy the challenge of trying to elevate it into an artwork by having some sort of concept in mind, accenting the atmosphere, redesigning the light pattern to be more eye-catching, using color like musical notes throughout a scene, and so on. In other words, I like to add a concept to my painting that will transcend the ordinary scene and make it extraordinary.

I'm never at a loss for ideas. I get so many in my sleep that I finally put a pad under my pillow to jot them down so I can go on sleeping. Often I'm surprised in the morning at the result.

**W:** How has your subject matter evolved over the years?

**JD:** My early paintings were designed with strong light patterns. Later, living in the Florida Keys, I was enchanted by the light effects and reflected light, especially in shadow areas. The large area of sea surrounding the tiny islands acts like a giant mirror and bounces light everywhere. Soon all my paintings, wherever painted, were sun-drenched.

Actually, I am never satisfied with my paintings. Recently I've been putting scenes together that I envision—that do not actually exist. One viewer told me that he enjoyed attending an annual exhibition each year just to see what I was doing, because my paintings were not predictable but usually something new or different.

**W:** Describe your basic approach to developing a painting.

**JD:** Each painting is a new adventure, so I do not want to be locked into a style or way of painting. My approach reflects my "basic training" as a mother ferrying children around, passing by a great scene, and having to formulate it in my mind as I timed swim meets and sat through play practice and sporting events. Thanks to my children, I developed a mental sketchbook so I knew how I would paint the scene when I had time to return to it.

Because time was so precious, I went directly for the essence, developing a glow or unusual color combination

or whatever was most important to me. If I ran out of time, I had captured the all-important component. The less critical sky and trees could be added later. If the effect wasn't successful, I hadn't wasted time painting all around my interest and saving it for last, which was the method taught at the time.

**W:** What is the role of the white paper in achieving the effects you desire?

**JD:** It is of tremendous importance. I think of whites as light. Although I save my whites, I work at making them glow. Often I will "blush" the white areas first to set up a reaction with the rest of the painting. The blush is so subtle, it is barely noticed. The final effect is especially luminous in the watercolor medium.

**W:** What are the most important factors in preserving a sense of freshness and spontaneity?

**JD:** Frankly, I'm too busy thinking of concerns other than technique when I'm composing a painting. I'm thinking of how to extract an arresting underlying shape pattern and tweaking colors to make some sing or float. Here, however, are two easy tips for keeping colors fresh. First, overstate your colors. You can lighten a color more easily than you can by repainting it over and over again. Second, avoid adjusting colors until the paper is covered. If you adjust a color en route, you may find at the end of painting that it needs to be restated again.

**W:** You've been involved in watercolor societies for a number of years. How has your participation in these groups enhanced your career?

**JD:** Like many artists, I work in isolation, and the societies provide exposure to artists that I admire and to their work. An active artist needs to be aware of what is happening in the art world. I thrive on the

BELOW

**Colors of an Island Evening**

1995, watercolor, 15 x 22. Collection Stephen Jameson. The artist used a glazing method to lend this painting a soft atmospheric effect.

OPPOSITE PAGE ABOVE

**American Quilt**

2004, watercolor, 29 x 21. Collection the artist. Dobie's concept here was to create subtle color vibrations within the fields, similar to those found in patchwork quilts.

OPPOSITE PAGE BELOW

**Illusion**

2002, watercolor, 21 x 29. Collection the artist.



stimulation and enjoy also sharing my interpretation of the world with others.

**W:** Which professional experiences have had the most impact on your development as an artist?

**JD:** My career really began when Steve Doherty, the editor of *American Artist* and *Watercolor*, asked me to share my light-pattern lesson with readers. Word spread to Watson-Guption Publications, and editors there asked me to write a book. During the five years I spent writing *Making Color Sing*, I found that working out the best progression from simple lessons to more complex lessons only strengthened my instruction. Around the same time I began organizing "Paint-escapes," workshops in which artists could pursue color and design in depth, and I gained valuable knowledge through conducting these painting trips around the world. Becoming a signature member of the American Watercolor Society and the National Watercolor Society and other national societies was another milestone, and contributed to my selection as juror for many national exhibitions. Although a lot has happened in the form of medals and awards, and they are all sincerely appreciated, the ultimate high for me is simply the act of painting in God's great outdoors. ■



**Island Tapestry**  
2004, watercolor,  
21 x 29. Collection  
the artist.

## About the Artist

**Jeanne Dobie's** work hangs in numerous collections, including the Frye Art Museum, in Seattle, and has appeared in many books and magazines. Dobie attended the University of Arts, in Philadelphia, and served on the faculty of the Moore College of Art, also in Philadelphia. Her book, *Making Color Sing*, has sold more than 100,000 copies, and she was recognized as one of the "20 Great Teachers" in the fall 2006



issue of *Watercolor*. She has taught workshops both in the U.S. and abroad and has produced an instructional DVD. The winner of numerous prestigious awards, Dobie is a member of the American Watercolor Society and the National Watercolor Society, among other professional organizations. She was recently named to the Pennsylvania Honor Roll of Women. To learn more or to contact the artist, visit [www.jeannedobie.com](http://www.jeannedobie.com).