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A PAINTER'S JOURNEY

PART I

An Introduction to Painting Knives

In this seven-part series, artist John Hulsey takes you on a visual journey through his outdoor and studio painting processes.

Most artists I've met know what a palette knife is, but aren't as familiar with the term "painting knife." A palette knife has a long, round-nosed offset blade and is used largely for mixing paint on the palette, or scraping it off. Painting knives are specialized tools for applying paint to a canvas or other substrate.

I had often seen painting knives hanging on racks in art supply stores and wondered what those tools were good for that a brush wasn't. I had palette knives around, and used them for years to mix paint and scrape up old paint from my glass palette, but that's as far as I went. I never thought to buy a few painting knives and try to use them actually to make paintings. That is, until a few years ago.

I had been painting for over 40 years, honing my brush techniques as I learned to use watercolors and oils and making a living as a professional artist and teacher. About three years ago, I began to feel unsatisfied with my painting efforts. I was tired of my old way of working and began to believe that my



Three of the many types of knife shapes: knife blade at top, palette knife in the middle and teardrop painting knife at bottom.

brushwork was not able to convey my subject adequately anymore. I think that this feeling had been going on for a good long while, as I struggled unsuccessfully with my old methods of working while trying to express my deepening understanding of the landscape where I live.

That's when I started searching for a new set of tools and techniques that would get me out of my comfort zone and upset the creative apple cart, so to speak. I remembered those painting

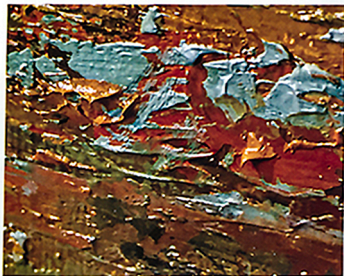
knives hanging in the store and decided that those tools were about as foreign to me as anything could be, and that seemed like a great place to start. I bought a small, randomly chosen collection of five knives on the spot and got busy trying them out.

Knife 411

My first experiments were amusing at best, and not viewable to anyone. I had to learn what knives could do. A lot of that is determined by their shape

and stiffness. As I played with paint it occurred to me that I could also use knives like plastering tools—applying paint thicker and with more texture. I discovered that they can be used for creating interesting textures unlike anything a brush can do. But, try and get anything like a precise brushstroke with a knife and the limitations of an old way of thinking about painting come up against a brick wall. Knives are devilishly hard to get any kind of realistic effects out of. Perfect for a realist artist like me who wished to create something new and different. I was convinced. I bought more knives.

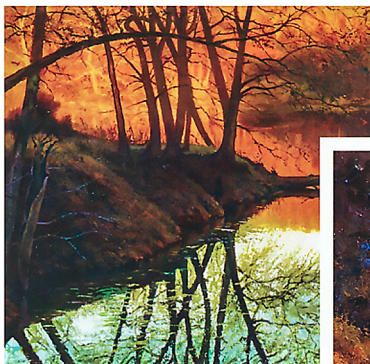
A palette knife has a long, round-nose offset blade and is used largely for mixing paint on the palette, or scraping it off. Painting knives are specialized tools for applying paint to a canvas or other substrate. Knives come in two parts—a handle, usually wood, and a blade. The highest quality painting knife blades are made from stainless steel. They are typically composed of a steel shaft soldered to a flat, flexible stainless blade that has been cut into a specific shape. The shaft is usually bent into an offset just before the solder joint, so that one's knuckles don't get into the paint as the tool is being used. A palette knife usually



Close-up images of paintings surfaces using a painting knife.



The Wood Ducks, oil on linen, 18 x 24" (46 x 61 cm)



Kingfisher's Day, oil on linen, 24 x 24" (61 x 61 cm)





Color string mixed for painting duckweed.

has no shaft—the offset blade emerges directly from the handle.

The blade of a painting knife has both a “heel” and a “toe.” The heel, where the blade is soldered to the offset shaft, comes in two basic shapes—the round or teardrop and the diamond. Each of these heel shapes has specific uses, though not exclusively. Generally speaking, the round heel allows for smooth applications of paint and the smoothing or blending of existing paint surfaces. The diamond heel is useful for sharp edges, lines or scraping off paint surfaces.

The “toe” of the knife does most of

the work and is made in a wide variety of lengths, widths and flexibility.

Much experimentation is needed to understand the marks each different one will likely make and how best to manipulate them while painting. I also use putty knives and drywall knives from the hardware store. Each knife can make distinctive shapes and has a place in my painting toolbox.

Don't be surprised if a favorite blade breaks off at the solder joint while you are working—this is normal wear and tear. You can either solder them back together, or do what I do and buy multiples of the ones you use most often.

Palette Work

I use color in subtle shifts of tone and temperature in my work. Over the years, I evolved a way of mixing colors that suits my needs and allows me to get the most out of a day of painting. I have a large glass palette where I squeeze out and use lots of paint.

First, I make some decisions about the major color masses that I will need. Then, I prefer using a round-heeled painting knife instead of a palette knife to mix up long strings of those color masses, working from warm to cool and perhaps light to dark as well. I blend these mixes while keeping the knife flat on the palette, using a sawing motion, up and down, left to right and right to left, until the colors transition one into another, smoothly. This gives me a vast selection of subtle color possibilities from which to choose. I do this for each large color mass in the painting, all at the same time. I might also cross-mix these major color strings into each other to create a set of colorful grays, which are all harmonized to each other. This process can take some time, but it is a worthy investment. Once the mixing is done, I need not mix more color (unless I run out) the rest of the session. The bulk of my time is spent painting, not mixing. And that is the fun part, after all. ■

ABOUT THE ARTIST

John Hulsey is a nationally recognized artist and accomplished master painter in watercolor, oil and pastel. A sought-after teacher who has been teaching painting for more than 35 years, Hulsey maintains an active studio practice along with his international and domestic teaching commitments. The recipient of numerous art awards and art grants, his work has been exhibited in group and solo exhibitions in galleries across the United States, from New York to California. During the 10 years Hulsey worked in New York, his paintings were featured on the cover of *Time* magazine and most of the major book and magazine publishers. His paintings are included in a number of private collections.

He has been awarded residencies by the National Park Service at Glacier National Park, Montana; Yosemite National Park, California; and Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado. Hulsey and his painter-wife, Ann Trusty, founded The Artist's Road teaching site in 2010 to share their lifetime of experience in art to an international audience. To date, they have created over 750 articles and interviews on art for the site. Some of his teaching videos can be found on YouTube at John Hulsey Fine Art.

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