

Effective Brushwork

(c)Malcolm Dewey Fine Art

Brushwork is an important part of what makes up a painting. A photograph does not have brushwork, but a painting should have good brushwork visible to the viewer. Your brushwork style will develop over time. As a beginner you are concerned about other things like drawing and color. But I want you to think of brushwork at this stage too. Here are a series of simple brushwork techniques to use now.

1. Thick and Thin

A simple yet effective technique is to vary the thickness of the paint by varying the brushwork. Apply more **pressure** to flatten out the paint. Less pressure leaves the paint thicker. A variation of angle of the brush will also help. A more diagonal angle may dig into the painting surface thus flattening the paint. A parallel angle to the surface will help to spread paint thickly. Often the darks will be thin and the light areas thick. Where appropriate use a painting knife to add thick paint too.



2. Vary How You Hold the Brush

Never hold the brush like a pencil. Hold it more with your palm as if it is a baton. Vary the angle of the brush head as required, but not so much the grip.

Effective Brushwork

It is preferable to move the arm rather than the wrist. This is a general way of ensuring your movements encourage big strokes rather than fiddles. Also make use of the long brush handle. Sometimes hold it closer to the ferrule. Other times near the end of the handle. Try to have a reason for how you hold the brush.

Also hold the brush firmly, but lightly. Not white knuckle and not sloppy either. Be flexible in wrists and fingers so that you can vary pressure and direction easily and in flowing movements where appropriate.

3. Loose Lines

When doing vertical lines and some diagonals, try holding the brush loosely and let gravity guide the brush - without you actually dropping the brush. This helps to get a spontaneous loose line. Thin tree branches and even masts of yachts can be done this way with care. You will find the edges are also softer and maybe a little lost-and-found. The idea is to paint looser this way. Make sure there is a good amount of paint on the brush so that the line can be completed in one go.



Effective Brushwork

4. Dry Brush - Scumble

This is not so much about the brush, but rather the paint is not diluted by any medium. Plus the brush is dragged over the surface of the painting in a flat, parallel motion. Move the brush decisively and briskly so that a broken color is achieved. Parts of the underlayer will show through gaps in the dry brush color.

This technique also works best when the underlayer is dry or is at least drier than the fresh paint. Use this to add sparkle to water, light in grass over fields, suggestions of light catching the leaves in trees. Also patina over walls of old buildings, rusty cars and any textured surface.



5. Combine Dabs, Lines and Mass Shapes

Create dabs of paint by loading paint on the brush. Then press the brush down on the canvas and lift off again. Avoid going over the dab and smoothing it out.

Lines are much like in 4 above.

Mass shapes comprise large brushstrokes or combination of strokes with the same color and value to create a large shape.

Effective Brushwork

The idea is to use all of these shapes in a painting to create a natural variety. If you used just dabs, for example, it would look perhaps like a pointilist painting. But this uniformity can be monotonous too.

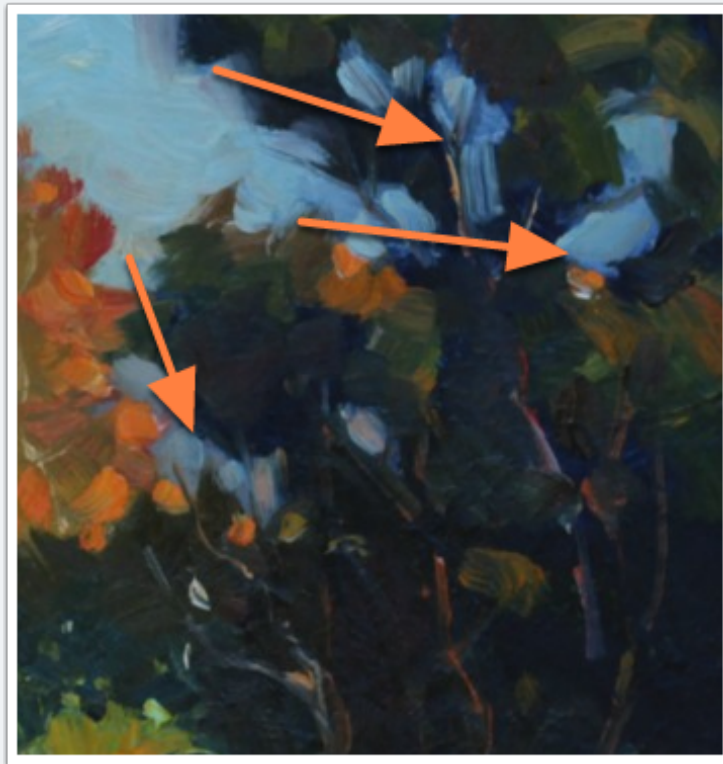
Thin lines dragged over a flat surface (like twigs over a large shape of a tree) will add much more interest.



6. Carve Out Negative Space

Create positive shapes by painting the negative shape. Often how you paint the negative shape is more important than painting the positive shape. For example painting the spaces in a tree reveals the branches. Change your viewpoint to see the negative spaces before they are even painted in. Then take your paint loaded brush and carve out the space.

I usually use a twisting wrist motion to do this particular brushstroke. It is not a spreading-type stroke but rather a push in then twist the brush to carve a shape.

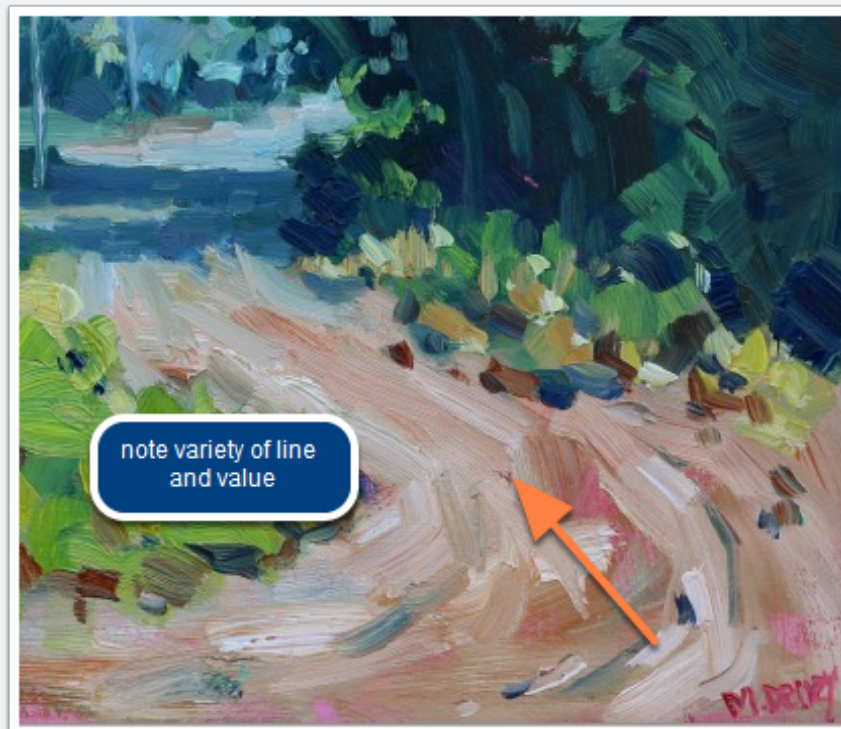


Effective Brushwork

7. Direction

Brushwork can suggest direction. Even with tarred roads you direction of the brushstroke will echo the direction of the road. On dirt roads this effect can be emphasised with thicker paint, value changes in ruts and so on.

Direction can also be used when painting trees or branches. Try to start at the base and follow the growth direction of the plant with your brush. This will help the branch look more natural as it tapers.



8. Descriptive Brushwork

Remember to keep your subject in mind for each brushstroke. It is easy to get into a mindless rhythm when painting. Automatically painting just to fill in shapes. This is an opportunity missed.

Examples of descriptive brushwork:

1. Crashing waves using quick upward brushwork to suggest exploding waves. Note the edges too.
2. Calm water - more blended with less value contrast and texture
3. Rough textured surfaces will need more impasto and broken color than smooth surfaces.
4. Flowing grass or clothing is different to static objects like rocks or walls.
5. Thin bending branches are painted differently to thick tree trunks.
6. Show contours of rolling hills with brushstrokes that mimic the shape.

Be mindful of the natural quality of the subject and try to use brushwork that supports the concept.



Effective Brushwork

Conclusion

Practice your brushwork intentionally. Especially how to hold the brush, variation of pressure and variation of direction.

A final thought is that brushwork must also be clean. By this I mean not mixing into other paint that will muddy your colors. Clean off your brush regularly with tissue paper to avoid messy color. Plus look where your brush is going so that you don't mix paint by accident. Careful and deliberate brushwork is not boring brushwork. I think of it as effective brushwork.

