Dear Fellow Artist,

Working from life is unquestionably the optimal way to work, but it’s not always possible. Weather, mobility, time constraints, among other things makes painting from life impractical some of the time. Weather is often an issue for me. No matter how hard-core you are, sometimes conditions will not allow you to do your best work outdoors. You may be on a painting trip when there isn’t enough time to paint all the many scenes that inspire you. If we don’t use photo reference in these cases, we could miss out on an opportunity to paint something of great merit!

I always suggest that you take your own photographs, but I know it’s not always possible for everyone to do that so I’ve put together this resource pack of 100 reference photos. I have many, many students struggle with what to paint and whether their photos are appropriate. I decided to share some of my pictures with you hoping they’ll spark new ideas on what makes a good subject. Some of them I’ve painted, some I haven’t. I hope that they will inspire you to get to the easel and perhaps take some photo expeditions of your own.

Keep in mind that I’m not a professional photographer. I’m a painter, so not all of these are perfect photos! That’s good. They leave room in there for us. You’ll need to do some work to use these to your best advantage and I’ve given you some tips on how to do just that!

I use photo reference all the time, so of course I believe that it’s possible to use photos effectively to make good paintings. I try to stay in the mind-set that I’m going to use my photo reference as merely a starting point rather than copying what I see. I want my paintings to be a lot better than my photos! If I’ve finished a piece and say to myself, “that looks just like the photo”, I haven’t hit the mark that I intended! The following are ideas on “How to Make Great Paintings From Photos –Best Practices” followed by my “Top 10 Tips” and some illustrations.

Happy Painting,

Marla

A word about usage: You have purchased the rights to use these photographs for reference material in your own work. You have not purchased the rights to reproduce the actual photographs in any other form such on the internet. However if you produce a painting from them, you are free to sell and publish that painting in any form you wish. Just be aware that these might be used in a similar fashion by your artist friends!
Be Enchanted! – When you are out taking pictures, let yourself be enchanted and captivated. Even a simple scene close to home can make a wonderful subject. Don’t forget to look behind you.

Take Lots! - Digital photography gives us a great deal of freedom. Go ahead and shoot to your hearts content, but use some sort of system for organizing and keeping track of your favorites. It’s very easy to get inundated by the choices if we’re not careful and then we are back where we started being overwhelmed by nature, just in a different way! I create folders of photos that particularly catch my attention. I also print contact sheets that are generated using small thumbnail sized images of many photos on one page. These small images tell me a lot about whether or not an image has strong shapes and values.

Take Notes - Making some quick notations and sketches documenting what attracted you to the scene can be useful later. Notes can deepen your connection and recollection of a place.

Know the Limits - Photographs lack a lot of important information so if you aren’t compensating your paintings will be deficient in those respects. Photographs can distort color, value and perspective. They usually provide little sense of depth or aerial perspective and reflective light is usually absent altogether. The camera captures everything will equal importance. It’s the artist’s eye that is discriminating and creates art. Photographs usually get the darks too darks and the lights too washed out. The mid-values are more reliable.

To compensate for shadows that are too dark look for ways to use broken color. If a shadow seems too brown or black add in some purples, blues, magentas or greens of the same value. This will add luminosity to your shadow areas. Remember that the blue of the sky on a sunny day (when we see shadow) will reflect into shadow shapes. This makes a great case for infusing our shadows will purple or lavender! To compensate for sunlit areas that are washed out or overexposed in a photo, avoid using white even if you see it in the photo! Look for colorful lights instead and use broken color-several colors of the same value. This will give you zesty lights!

Crop for Composition - Look for ways to crop your photo, edit out extraneous areas or elements, move elements or objects. Remember that you are not improving on nature; you are improving your painting!

Don’t make things up - Unless I am 100% sure of myself, I don’t make something up from my imagination if I’m relying on a photo for the rest of my scene. The element that I make up invariably sticks out like a sore thumb. If I have multiple reference sources, that’s another thing altogether. For instance, if there is no fence in my scene, I don’t try to create one unless I have a piece of reference of a fence in a similar setting.

Combine - You might even combine several photos. One effective way to combine photos is to use the compositional idea from one and the color idea from another. This inherently moves me away from the reference toward a more personal statement and provides a starting point.

Mental Planning – Take a couple minutes to see the largest and easiest shapes in your composition. You don’t really have to put it down on paper, but plan your attack so to speak. What shapes are you going to start with
Once you’ve settled on the cropping of your photo, you can begin to build your “playground”. I’m not shy about using every tool available to me in this initial and crucial stage of my painting. This is where it really happens! So take the time to think it out, plan it out and sketch it out. It will be a great investment of your time.

A piece of tracing paper laid over the photo can help me simplify. It’s like squinting. Then, in my mind’s eye, not necessarily on paper, I visualize the 3 to 5 biggest and easiest shapes, connecting shapes that are similar in value. Then, I will do a quick contour sketch to see if I’m on the right track. If I like it, I’ll create one or two thumbnail sketches or “notans”, which have some value indicated.

Having taken time for this bit of planning, I’ve built a strong foundation for my painting.

Time for the thumbnail! Try some different tools until you find what works best for you. I love ball point pens because they make good, dark gradations and you can find them anywhere! Markers are absolutely lovely too.
Cropping For Compositions
Multiple Compositions Within An Image!

Use “L” shaped pieces of paper, tape or digital cropping to help you!
when you begin painting? What is the biggest and easiest thing to see?

**Contour Drawing** - Take a few minutes to do a simple contour drawing. This will give you a good idea whether your composition has a solid structure.

** Thumbnails** - Making several thumbnails to decide on compositional arrangements is a good investment of a little time. Try out several proportions before you commit to a larger piece. I like to use ballpoint pens to do my thumbnails; they are efficient when making a gradation and they are available everywhere! You never have to worry about whether you’ve got one. I also enjoy making thumbnails with a range of grey markers. They come in both warm and cool greys.

**Scale It Correctly** – A common and easy to make mistake, is to do all the work of cropping, planning, thumbnails, just to get the proportion wrong on the final piece. Make sure you scale it up correctly so you are “apples to apples” with your thumbnail. If you don’t, your painting doesn’t stand a chance of having the same character as your thumbnail. That’s one reason we can often be disappointed we and we don’t like the finish as well as the thumbnail; we didn’t get the proportion correct!

**Don’t be a Slave** - Always look for ways to improve on your photographs. They are rarely perfect as is and if one is too beautiful, you could wind up being tempted to copy it faithfully rather than making your own painting from it. I always like to think of making just a nod to my reference. I don’t want to be a slave to the reference! Some of my best paintings are from really bad photos. There seems to be more room in them for me.
My Top Ten Tips

#1 Choose photos with 3 to 5 strong shapes.

#2 Choose photos with distinct value differences.

#3 Keep it simple – don’t overlook the simple subjects.

#4 Don’t choose photos that are overly dark.

#5 Avoid photos that are very sentimental. It’s sooo easy to get precious with these!

#6 Do choose subjects that you are really attracted to and inspired by!

#7 Crop your photos to find the best composition.

#8 Try different proportions.

#9 DO THUMBNAILS!

#10 Remember that you are making a painting, not copying a photo!

Contact Sheet In Photos Mac: Select your images, go to Print, select Contact Sheet and the number of rows and columns. Small images let you see the big picture.

Watch Out! Too Dark!!