

# How to Deal with Unfinished Paintings

One of the New Year resolutions on my artistic list is to resolve more of the unfinished paintings residing in my studio. Leonardo da Vinci famously said, “Art is never finished, only abandoned.” In my studio, there are a lot of forsaken works wistfully awaiting completion.

## Work on More Than One Painting at a Time:

This accumulation of unfinished works is a byproduct of my artistic temperament. Once I'm in process, I can easily overwork a painting by constantly making changes and adjustments. I eventually lose track of my initial concept and direction, frequently destroying a painting that had showed a lot of promise. This isn't a problem I have when working outdoors under the time constraints of [plein air painting](#).

But to avoid the problem of overworking when doing studio painting, I've learned that it's best for me to work on more than one painting at a time. As hard as it may be to take a break and step back from the easel, the derived benefits of shifting my attention to another work make it easier to stay objective. It helps to keep me focused on the bigger picture (concept) of the painting instead of becoming obsessed with minutia. This has allowed my painting style to become more impressionistic, which has been one of my lifelong artistic goals.

## **Organizing Unfinished Paintings Into Groups:**

While the practice of having more than one painting going at a time has been beneficial for me, the side effect is an accumulation of unfinished works. Instead of staying interested and focused on a couple of paintings at a time, I tend to amass dozens and eventually hundreds of uncompleted works, many going back for years. To remedy this, I have learned to organize the works periodically into categories of interest, merit and subject matter.

- ***The interest pile*** is comprised of paintings I feel very motivated to work on. Often they are recent works where my memory is fresh as to why I was painting them and what I was planning to do with them.
- ***The merit pile of paintings*** is just that—paintings that exhibit artistic qualities that warrant further exploration. They may be older works, representing previous technique methods but still have enough merit to justify completion.
- ***The subject matter pile*** is made of paintings that may overlap with the interest and merit piles but are categorized by content. If I'm working on a couple paintings simultaneously, it's often better to stay within similar subject matter. For the landscape, this can mean working on scenes grouped by season of the year, time of day, or region.

Once selections are made from one of these piles, it's time to confront the issue of finishing.

It's also cathartic to periodically purge unfinished paintings no matter their potential. Constantly entering a studio and being confronted with an abundance of incomplete works can be detrimental to forward growth. It may be hard, but letting go will definitely clear your mind for future artistic adventure.

By Richard McKinley

