

> Personal style and research

Hello everybody,

I am Didier Brot French leader for Fabriano in aquarello. Watercolourist since always and professional for fifteen years, I expose regularly and I animate workshops everywhere on the planet.

I would like to talk to you about a subject that comes up often in the discussions of students but also of watercolorists in general. The search for his style, his personal writing.

However, I will not be able to discuss this subject without also speaking to you about the teaching of watercolors which will inevitably influence this famous personal style.

First of all, what is "personal style", what does "having your own writing" mean?

I suggest you to do a little experience around you. Ask 2 people who have never or hardly ever painted, who say they don't know how to paint or draw. That they'll even have to force them to try. Explain to them that it is only for a personal experience and not to organize their next exhibition at the Louvre!

You suggest a topic to them and you ask them to do what they can each on their own. Once finished, compare the works. They will be totally different. Certainly without technique, surely not very academic, not very faithful (is it really important?), Ugly perhaps. But they are different and unique and are the exact reflection at T time of the personal STYLE of this painters. Then you ask them to paint another subject. The realization will be just as clumsy, technically weak, etc., I will not repeat everything but it will be in the same style as the first. Fatherhood will be evident. But the styles will be totally different from person to person.

So what does "having a personal style" mean, "having your own writing"?

Our writing is necessarily linked to our personality. This one was formed from many parameters related to our culture, our social environment, our family education, our level of training, our experiences, our work, our religion, our sensitivity in short everything that makes us a being social, an impressionable being. Parameters that are long-term and come from far away, from our birth.

Our writing is also linked to parameters specific to our individual at T time such our technical mastery, our past pictorial experiences, our investment in time but also in effort to learn, to practice, to test, our expertise on such or such point (drawing, color, etc...)

A small aside to point out that technical mastery is the only parameter on which we all or almost all want to act to find our style (hence the multiplication of workshops). Much less about work, individual experimentation, etc. Be careful, I try to draw

general lines and I neither generalize nor dramatize. Not everyone does this, but a large majority.

So as living beings we are under the influence, this is a great discovery and we are not perfect! Nothing very new then! And we want to prove that we exist by distinguishing ourselves with a style unique to us and to us alone (at least that is what we would like!) How to do it?

For many painters, for multiple more or less valid, acceptable reasons, they will do so by staying on a writing for a very long time. Not just for two or three years, but very often for much more than that, sometimes even for their whole life. This is called rehearsal art (well known in Street Art). Suddenly they become recognizable and we assign them a personal style, a writing well identified with their person. Sometimes even, a few small details are enough to identify them and if another painter uses one of these details, we will not fail to qualify him as a copier! So often the masters themselves, by an assertive style, by a constantly repeated and therefore recognizable style, tend to make people believe (involuntarily I grant you) that having a personal style is important.

"It is thanks to it that I exist" someone will tell me one day!

Does this mean having a personal style? To lock yourself in a writing and never leave it again? Does having a personal writing mean in today's Art to be recognizable? Does your personal style have to supplant your individual, your personality? Should it be more important than yourself? The creature more important than the creator? Everyone has their own answer. I give you mine it's no! My style shouldn't be more important than me. I want to be able to be free to do what I want and especially when I want. Not in 10 years. There, now, immediately.

Not when I have amortized my research and my discoveries. A very capitalist, very industrial discourse a thousand miles from Art. However, I have heard it in a few mouths of recognized watercolorists!

No, having your personal style is painting as you can at T time . But alas not necessarily as you would like!

Should we make it an absolute quest, a systematic search? Is it really necessary? I'm asking you.

For me, there should not be a quest for a writing to have a writing, to stop there and never evolve again.

So no search for a Master X style but accept that right now I'm painting like this and it's my style, or rather my non-style!

Some masters that I find locked in their writing, tell me that they evolve, that their writing changes. Surely ! The mastery of their technique increases with the years of practice, improves, in short there are nuances that didn't exist before. An obvious mastery that makes the work even more beautiful, transparent and bright, full of

sensitivity and spontaneity. The spirit is released. Normal, the spirit is released when the hand is completely free! But the style, the writing is always the same. For proof, suggest to a neophyte of watercolor, not knowing all the tips and tricks of the watercolorists and show him a work of the master of today and one of several years ago. He will say that they are the same!

Let's go back to the fact that the artist should be able to paint as he wants, as he feels. But alas he only paints as best he can. We can only paint with our capacities of the moment, whether immense or weak. It is a fact ! Our level of technical mastery at T time, our expertise but also our experience, our sensitivity necessarily limits us. But there is also the fear of no longer pleasing. The fear of no longer selling. The fear of no longer being "recognizable". Nothing worse for some artists than being told: "Oh I preferred what you did before!

Difficult to live with, but if the artist doesn't look for other ways, if he doesn't put himself in danger, if he doesn't put himself in imbalance, there can be no movement therefore no evolution (this is the basic principle of the movements mechanics). So no way to go to what he wants. He should not be satisfied with what he can.

Unfortunately many painters don't ask themselves such questions and are persuaded or rather persuade themselves (unconsciously) that their writing is an illuminated choice. To make a joke and tease my painter friends: Illuminated surely but by a very small flashlight! 5min30

Reflex of survival, surely and normal, human should I say! We all went there! Me first. So no problem yet, you have to be aware of it and work on it, fighting I should say so as not to sink into the routine of this too personal style.

But my answer is also yes,

Yes to the quest for a personal writing, in search of his personal style.

Yes there must be a quest, a systematic search. But an absolute quest such as that of the Holy Grail, infinite, eternal almost mystical a search for change, for evolution, with never to stop and say "I found and I stop here". The artist must move the lines and not leave the public in pseudo comfort, in habits or in seeing totally superficial certainties notably linked to an economic vision of his work (even if unfortunately it is unavoidable).

Why ? Why shouldn't we stop here? ,

To avoid being very recognizable, too recognizable To avoid locking yourself in, slowing down and depriving yourself of creative freedoms?

To stop at a clearly identifiable style which belongs only to you is a trap, a prison, surely gilded at the beginning but which will show its limits more or less quickly.

How many very famous artists have died very frustrated by the artistic confinement linked to their writing. . Being recognized is a good thing, vital even for professional painters. Being recognizable is much less. A scent of glory, intoxicating success but deadly at the end! I personally knew one, died since, who admitted to me "suffering" from this confinement .

Picasso once wrote: Success is dangerous. You start to copy yourself and copying yourself is more dangerous than copying others ... it's sterile. "

But success raises another aspect of individual style. To be recognizable too easily and to have a very assertive personal style, too repetitive should I say to make myself better understood, encourages a certain number of people to practice your style. Initially the intention is good. Only learning pushes you to copy a master. But the recipe, the style is so good, that even trivialized, diluted by your clumsy brushstrokes, we find the style of the master. It's inevitable. As long as it stays in your workshop it's fine. It is only for you, for your understanding. The problem comes from your loved ones, family, friends and others, from today's society. They are not experts in watercolor, do not know the master copied and even less his style. Wow, how beautiful. Superb you have really progressed. I love ! You should exhibit, share on networks. You deserve it, for sure !!

Well, you don't deserve it. You learn and you copy. So each thing in its time Mister or Madam the pupil or the amateur artist.

So I come back to this confinement linked to a determination on a well defined style.

Friends, amateur painters, students and trainees, but also professional friends, I therefore suggest that before your writing shows you its limits, start looking for other limits! Go on an adventure discovering new horizons. Not by giving up everything that nourishes and satisfies you right now. But don't wait for frustration, the feeling of being trapped by your own writing, then it would be too late.

Do research in parallel. Suggest other scriptures to test the impressions of others. Do not be too long !

If you have allowed yourself to be locked up by the public by always offering them the same recipe, you are solely responsible for it. If the recipe is very good, it will take a long time to get tired of it, but it will be all the more difficult to get them used to another recipe. Attention the modes pass and pass away!

But beyond this potential frustration, this possible confinement, there is also the fact that always producing in the same way is more a craft than an Art. Art should not have rules, limits. Crafts YES! To eternally reproduce the same things in the same way automatically generates habits, therefore rules that painters transmit to their students while asking them not to copy them. Real paradox! If we asked a little more existential and a little less technical questions, we could bring to young artists technical answers

of course, but not only. Existential answers too! And the future of Art depends more on this learning than on mastering one technique or another.

So we all have a personal style which is linked to many parameters as I explained. The problem it is that this personal style, doesn't resemble any other (and it's so much the better) but that it doesn't satisfy us because it seems incomplete, not sufficiently accomplished. NOT ENOUGH LOOKING LIKE WHAT IS DONE! Normal, the lack of expertise, of work can be seen but you are there and that is what matters.

As we want to save time, we want to learn faster and therefore we will follow an education.

As I said, I have been teaching watercolor for many years. First of all in regular weekly classes and now with itinerant internships in many countries around the planet, India, Cuba, Canada, Turkey, Greece, Morocco, Italy, Spain, Peru and many others.

I also regularly participate in exhibitions, competitions as a watercolorist but also as a juror and I observe the following:

A desire to go faster and produce immediately so that we can share on social networks, in order to show ourselves, to be congratulated. In short, to exist on a planet where information explodes! In short, nothing very surprising or original, it seems that it is our time that wants that.

To save time, the amateur watercolorists, the students eagerly jump on the workshops offered in number. There are more and more of them on the Watercolor planet. And what better way than to go directly to a great master, renowned, with a powerful style and an unusual writing. I'm asking you ? Often there is nothing worse !!

If in fact there is worse! And this is unfortunately too often the case; the pupils think that increasing the number of workshops with the great masters will help them progress faster. 10mn45

The notion of work, learning the basics, practicing your art regularly, making scales as you hear in the world of music, in short spending time on your Art, giving it time, are notions that belong to the past and less and less in our time. You have to produce and exist IMMEDIATELY!

Luis Catala, 84-year-old Cuban painter I met in February said to me "Art will give the artist what the artist has given to Art. " To meditate !!

How many artists, pseudo artists, apprentice artists would be less negative. How many therefore offer watercolors whose paternity is obvious and flood regional, national and even international fairs and festivals. To make sure, you ask the person if they have done an workshop with this or that master and the answer will be affirmative almost

every time. It's obvious that their paintings have a style. What's more is a style that is in tune with the times. It does not surprise the spectators who often have the impression of knowing but without really recognizing. So everything is fine and we congratulate you on your new style!

At present in France and surely in other countries, I will be provocative but who know me, will not be really surprised, almost 30 or even 40% of the watercolors produced, exhibited resemble less than 10 styles, masters of world watercolor. So this tendency to want to "imitate" well-known styles tends towards a trivialization, a standardization of Watercolor. We can no longer count the number of backlit urban landscapes with very strong contrasts and some silhouettes lit by a white glow on the shoulder and the top of the skull as master Y. Even if the watercolor is not a true copy, the few spots randomly sown to animate the sky like a few pigeons mean that you are in the universe of master Z. If in addition you sign in red, you are at master XYZ! An old watercolor friend calls it international style. But what struck me in my many travels is that these international styles, or which I would rather describe as Western sensitivities, are copied, borrowed from Eastern civilizations where the themes previously treated, painted, techniques and styles used had absolutely nothing to do, were totally different. This phenomenon is not new and has already been observed with fashion, clothing. Traditional, historical clothes, but also everyday clothes tend to be replaced by jeans / t-shirt outfits.

Whose fault is it ? Who is responsible? How did we get here ?

Are there emergency exits? Any way out of it? By dint of running behind a personal pseudo style, would this be the beginning of a standardization of writing in Watercolor?

Maybe not totally, but!

I don't know. No one knows !

How did we get there ?

Our society, our current culture of appearance, of the superficial, of the everything very quickly and immediately, it is sure and we are all confronted with it. The putting of the earth on standby by the Covid 19 virus, the slowing down of our rhythm of life, the decrease in pollution, brief few positive signals in the midst of this tragic and sad period in many ways should help us to become more aware of it. Perhaps ! I close the parenthesis and come back to my subject.

But there is also a part linked to our watercolor world, a part on which it would be easier to act. Or at least becoming aware of it would already be a first step.

How did we get to the beginning of standardization of watercolor, an internationalization of styles?

The teaching and especially the teaching method have a big share of responsibility in this standardization.

In the majority of the cases that I know, the masters teach neither the techniques, nor the art of watercolor but show exclusively how they paint, therefore only THEIR technique. As I am provocative, I will say that perhaps they know only one?

They sell their recipe. Their pedagogy is too often based on step by step method. (In parentheses, Difficult to do otherwise with groups of up to 20 or even 25 people!) So the speech is: "Do it just like me!" It can be very satisfying for the student who has the impression of knowing how to paint At the end of the workshop or session, everyone has practically the same table with differences in skills. Yet at the start all the students were different with different technical levels, different experiences, different sensitivities, social backgrounds and cultural different. The magic of the step-by-step method or how to erase your personality in two brush strokes. In fact the professor didn't give enough freedom, not enough space to the individual to be able to try to express themselves with the means that are his at the time of the session. His personal style was there, even with no means, no technique. The purpose of this teaching is to tend, to get as close as possible to the master's work and not to learn watercolor with a capital A !.

During discussions between professional watercolorists, many tell me that they listen, that they are attentive, that they let the students make their choice. Most certainly true, I am inclined to believe them. But when we take a closer look at the many photos from the social networks of the same teachers, we regularly see photos of classes where all show the same watercolor. Normal since the master left freedom of choice but to tend towards his writing. The proposed subject is not "how could we paint this subject" but "how did I treat it?" And how do you get there? Strange isn't it?

With the pedagogy of the step by step, whether it is very directed or that it is released, no place for difference! The more or less clear, more or less avowed objective will be to try to paint like the master. And the closer we get, the more we will be satisfied! Make way for instant mimicry.

What happens during a step-by-step session. The master does not explain watercolor, does not learn painting, he shows what he can do. He shows that he puts water like this. Whether he takes this or that color or that. Why ? Often he explains. Not always. But anyway whether he explains it or not, if you follow his choice, his explanations obviously convincing, you will identify with him it is mandatory. And the more he explains why he chose this or that, the more you will be convinced and therefore locked up. Because you will not have the capacity, not the courage, not the experience to find another reason not to do like him. What he explains to you is so obvious that there cannot be other valid possibilities. So message to all the masters who try to convince us that they use step by step method but that they leave free the students of their choice and that they encourage them to make their choice, but that the subject is one of your paintings . I believe you. But look at the end of the session what their paintings look like.

Let's take a closer look at this teaching so practiced everywhere on our watercolor planet!

To better understand our responsibilities as a teacher, I suggest some analogies with other teachings.

What to teach? What does it mean to teach? Teaching means knowing how to put yourself at the level of your pupil to welcome them as they are and give them part (I said ONE! Part!) Of the information they need to move forward and take a step further. So it's a way to go to him. The teacher must put himself at the level of his student to give him the ability to understand and succeed in what he is learning. Do we agree with that? This is the basis. It is therefore not the student to rise up to the teacher and try to imitate him or do exactly what he is doing.

What is it step by step method? I don't know how to paint or almost not or very little. Maybe I already paint quite well but not at all like the master which explains my presence in his workshop. I want to learn and understand his technique, his personal approach. He shows me and I have to redo what he just showed me just now. Break down of course by step by step, easier to follow than if the master painted all at once but complicated anyway as there are a multitude of details in the water intake, color, mixtures but also of composition. In short, everything that comes into play in painting. So I have to follow in the footsteps of the master. It is up to the student to adapt, to hear, to understand, to try and to master what he says to me. It's up to me to try to learn to walk with his shoes on. Complicated if you don't have the same size !!

Let's take a few analogies to see if this teaching method was applied in other subjects.

Music: Music is a very good example because in 99% of cases we are only interpreters, therefore copiers. We do not compose, we do not create except in our interpretation of the work.

Do you think you can learn music by going to concerts all your life or just watching your teacher play?

Your teacher will play you a whole song or in small pieces. He will say to you: "Up to you". And you will play? First learn music theory, learn to play the instrument, make scales, practice, practice, work.

Take language lessons and listen only to the teacher speak and try to immediately repeat what he said. All of this quickly perfectly when you only understood a tiny part of it. Without learning grammar, vocabulary, conjugation. Impossible!

Take a class at school where the teacher would say to the students: "I know you don't know how to count, but I'm showing you: $2 + 2 = 4$, $4 + 4 = 8$, $8 + 8 = 16$. Go and repeat after me! That's it you can count! What do you think the student will do? He will know how to add all the figures? No if the master questions him and if he has a good instant memory, he will repeat: $2 + 2 = 4$, $4 + 4 = 8$, $8 + 8 = 16$. The master will congratulate him and tell him "it's good you can add". He will go home and publish his learned additions on Facebook. Which ones do you think? $2 + 2 = 4$, $4 + 4 = 8$, $8 + 8 = 16$ that's it. He will not know how to count.

I have also spoken on several occasions about the master's recipe. If you are going to take a cooking class with an undisputed master of carbonara spaghetti for example. Are you going to come back knowing how to cook? No, you will come back with the exceptional carbonaras recipe the way you ... You will amaze your friends and family. Although your recipe is not as good as that of the master, the ingredients provided by the master allow you to create a recipe that no one around you was used to before. Congratulations, admiration and all the rest. How are you going to get out of this trap? Will you be condemned to make for your friends only this exceptional Carbonaras recipe? If you try another recipe your way, when you are not a cook, it may seem bland in the eyes of your loved ones compared to Carbonaras. "I preferred your Carbonaras" It's good but still your Carbonaras recipe !! etc ... Watch out for the praise that consolidates the error. Difficult to keep your ego on a leash, difficult to admit that this is not your recipe. Difficult to want to innovate and test other recipes when you risk being systematically compared to something else of which you know intimately the authorship. And it's not yours. The ego is often much stronger and far worse counsel than reason.

Of course these are only analogies, shortcuts. Not everything is as clear cut, especially in the kitchen. But it is to better convey a message.

All this to say that the masters, teaching in general, teaching step by step in particular are not the only cause of this standardization which provokes this will, this need for research of personal style. The students, the watercolor apprentices, you, we, all are also actors of this phenomenon.

Some artists or pseudo artists themselves are faced with this problem, are tempted by the ease, the speed of access to a recognized style. This is commonly seen. What in the past was a common and unavoidable practice (I'm talking about the old days), students had to learn to copy to master the techniques of their master. But there were no social networks, exhibitions of amateur painters. The students copied into the master's workshop under the master's supervision with the sole purpose of student learning. He had to free himself from the master by finding his own way, his own style. It took a life and often didn't work out. But at the time, only the work associated with talent made it possible to succeed. The appearance did not exist.

I will tell you one or two anecdotes lived.

The first at a renowned watercolor festival, a master discovers that one of his students exhibits at the same time as him and that the paintings are almost identical and just as good or almost!

He makes a scandal and asks for the exclusion of the pupil otherwise he leaves. We discussed with several. I explained to him that he had sold him his recipe. She paid for

it. So she had the right to use it! I was not very convinced but towards the master this is what I wanted him to hear!

After discussion, the two will stay. Finally visitors will see 2 painters but only one style!

The second, a professional friend of Watercolors who regularly runs workshops, was attacked via social networks. She has a technique and therefore a very particular writing which was unique at the beginning. Over time, the technique used has been understood and even reproduced endlessly. Without equaling the sensitivity, the quality of my friend. But there is an obvious kinship there: the technique used. How was it attacked? In fact, on social networks, several people criticized her for having followed an internship with her. Not to have had access to HIS technique. And so they were deceived and disappointed with the teacher's attitude. This misadventure of my friend led me to reflect and draw 2 conclusions:

- The first proves that students, trainees come to seek a technique, a tip and not advice and methods to raise their own writing. Even if the master stipulates a detailed program, the pupils see the master only through this technique.
- The second is that the masters, holders of a very specific technique, by the fact of using it exclusively for an extended period, are identified with this writing only. Students are therefore entitled to wait and see how, why and for what purposes this technique is used by the teacher. The fact that the master thinks it's his good is as illusory as believing in Santa Claus! On the pretext that a master uses excessively and eternally does a color automatically give him his property? Prohibiting others from using it permanently? Surely not.
- In addition to keeping his thing for himself, his attitude is a miscalculation. Out of 100 students who would receive instruction in this specific technique identifying you specifically. 90% will not be interested in using it for multiple reasons (too complicated, not mastered enough, does not correspond to their expectations, too identifiable to the master, etc.) Of the remaining 10% perhaps half will master the technique to the point of being able to use it for purely amateur purposes. Of the remaining 5%, able to use the technique or even perhaps master it almost as the master perhaps 1 or 2 students will do the imprudence to copy the master, to use the technique and to exhibit and participate in livingrooms. Maybe even be in competition with the master as I just explained to you. But in any case, the observers will say "it looks like master B" or else "It can be seen that she took lessons with master B! "Or" what a cheek to dare to copy a master like this. " In short, in all cases the student will be disqualified. The valued master. The student without knowing it will through its exhibitions, broadcasts on networks the free promotion of the master's writing and the presence of this student in certain salons will even encourage other students to register for the master's courses.
- In any case, I really insist in all cases the master is the winner. The student copier is the loser because he is always chasing the master. And especially what is the most unfortunate, the 99 other students are deprived of something that would have done no

harm to the teacher and that would have entirely satisfied them. They would then have valued even more the participation in the training courses of this master and would do publicity. So a very bad calculation from the master!

To conclude, Our art, Watercolor has always been considered a Minor Art. This is evolving in many countries, but the struggle is far from over and even less is won. In too many countries still, Watercolors have no place in galleries, museums or very large exhibitions. I repeat it changes. It is evolving but very slowly. The movement is still fragile. It is therefore up to us to be vigilant and not to disturb it, not to handicap it by adding too much extraneous noise. Too many beautiful things are produced today. The innovation is there. The research of many great masters is bearing fruit and emphasizing Watercolors. Watercolors need locomotives to drive it, but not a train with all the identical cars! Around me, in France and abroad, I meet more and more creative watercolorists, in full control and who are aware of all this. They did not need this speech to act immediately. So I can only rejoice and say let's go on! Their teaching approaches are evolving but more is needed.

I did not want to end this presentation on negative and overly critical notes. I think that to advance our Art, we must be vigilant but without states of mind, without concession and be able to have a critical eye on even weak signals which increase with time and which will fundamentally rock our Art on one side or the other. It is up to us to be vigilant so that it is not on the dark side !!

Here are quickly some elements brought to your consideration. It's up to you to provide answers, to adapt or not your habits in order to develop our art or not!

It is said in France, this is a pavement in the pond!

If you want to evolve, if you want to get things done, you have to know how to change.

Let's act, don't let trivialization reach us!

Thank you for your attention.