

A vibrant, abstract painting of a face. The face is composed of various colors and textures, with two snakes (one pink and one green) positioned in the center, appearing to be part of the face's structure. The eyes are large and expressive, with a reflection of a window in each. The overall style is highly detailed and colorful.

Get to the Fundamentals with the Language of Painting

by Malcolm Dewey

Ebook Author

Get to the Fundamentals with the Language of Painting

Let me show you my best painting secret!



Do you struggle to find a breakthrough in your painting skills? You know that feeling that there are painting secrets to unravel, but you cannot find them? It can be frustrating when you want to grow your skills, but there is something missing. And you need the answers now. Yup, I know that feeling well.

Recently I had the pleasure of being a guest on [Alexis Fedor's Artists in Business podcast](#). In this episode I talk about how I went about looking for these answers.. Read the transcript below.

Painting's Secrets Like I said I had this strange idea that there are painting secrets that only a few had access to. This was the case a few centuries ago when master artists belonged to secret guilds. But a lot has changed since then. **Especially at the start of the twentieth century when painting became a pastime for hobby painters** . Now the internet has changed everything once again. Or has it?

Why Language of Painting?

Despite the wealth of information out there it is still difficult for beginners to progress beyond the basics. Volume of information is not the answer it seems. The real issue is sifting through all that knowledge and getting a grip on what is important.

Like a spoken language you need to know where to start learning or it will be a long struggle. If you try to learn English and do not get the basics of word order correct you will speak nonsense. Writing a book would be unthinkable. Yet so many artists want to paint stunning works without learning the language of painting.

What About Different Styles of Painting?

If you learn these fundamentals will this mean you cannot have your own style? Absolutely not. The beauty of learning a language is that each person can excel in whatever direction they like. You can speak, sing or write a language. Poems, sonnets, novels and so much more is possible with words. The same applies to painting. All you need is the language to set yourself free.

What does the Language of Painting Consist Of?

What this means to you as a painter is to learn how to observe. Then to interpret your observations into shapes, values, colours and edges to arrive at a painting. It does sound simple at first, but I know that this is a lifetime pursuit.

But do not worry. You can learn the important steps quickly enough. Beginners can make huge leaps in skill and confidence. But there are plateaus to endure before you make the next leap. The joy is knowing that you are refining your skills. The frustration of not knowing the secrets is finally over.

Teaching the Language

This journey into painting meant that I had to study masters both old and contemporary. The benefit of this is finding the overlaps. The common lessons, traits and practices that they all agree on. These overlaps form the language I have been speaking of. Each have their own styles, but each know the elements of colour, composition, values and much more.

I put together a course called [Learn to Paint With Impact](#) that teaches these fundamentals. It is not a simple course. It takes time and students have to practice to make progress. But it remains my most popular course because it **reveals a path that will lead to results**. It is the method that I have built on and so too have many others.

Find out more about the course [here](#).

You can also [listen to the podcast](#) plus more about my learning path on Alexi's podcast episode.

Let me show you my best painting secret!

Get the **FREE** painting course: [How to Add Power to Your Painting](#)

Read the Interview Transcript:

Introduction: Welcome to the artists in business podcast Alexis Fedor, inspiring interviews and practical advice on how to build a thriving business with your art your way, and now here's Alexis.

Alexis: Malcolm Dewey is a contemporary impressionist artist who paints in oils, acrylics, and watercolors, and is largely inspired by landscapes and seascapes and figure studies. The second part of his work is to teach the fundamentals of painting and to write about the artist's process, lifestyle, and business of art.

In our discussion, we talk about the importance of getting back to the fundamentals to understand where your work is coming from and what direction you should take to take the best path for you, your art, and those you serve. Artists. You truly don't want to miss this episode. So Malcolm, thank you so much for being here today on the artist in business podcast. I'm really happy to have you on the show.

Malcolm: Thank you Alexis. I'm glad to be here and thanks for the invitation.

Alexis: It's such a pleasure. So I'd love just by way of introduction for you to talk about what it is you do and how you also help other artists. Being a fine artist yourself, build their, their body of work.

Malcolm: Yes. Essentially I'm a fine artist and work in the traditional mediums of oil painting or watercolor and I'm pretty much in the impressionist or contemporary impressionist type of painting genre if you want to put it that way. I got involved in, in a considerable amount of learning curve myself years ago.

I found that I was really struggling to make a breakthrough into professional quality work. I needed to get my work up to standard that I was happy with. I guess that is a lifelong pursuit. But nevertheless I was under the impression that there was a lot more that I needed to get access to as an artist or improve my work. And, you know, as I kept digging and delving into the arcane world of painting because that's what it really seemed like.

Malcolm: There was so much information out there of superficial nature. Most art books, most dvds, et Cetera, where we're dealing with a similar stage of painting. But then you quickly felt like you're kind of abandoned and there was a lot more information you had to get. And I was not really getting access to master artists to be, more or less, mentored by them. The town I was living in is quite small and it didn't have that sort of relationship with other artists. So I kind of had to make my own way. Being I guess someone who likes to really get stuck into it and work at something. I ended up working on that aspect of learning. And then the idea came. I was seeing a lot of contemporary artist colleagues having the similar sort of struggle themselves.

Malcolm: You know, there's, there are really no secrets to painting, or improving your painting. It's simply being able to understand the language of painting. That was important. What had to be concentrated on to make those leaps of improvement. So I started putting together courses, especially online because that's how it was reaching a lot of people. That's really how various courses came about and you know, my first major course was simply aimed at getting people, especially beginner artists and also those at intermediate level to jump into the deep end as well. And stuff I was teaching was not something that was readily found. So that proved to be quite popular and to this day it's the core system of my most popular course. If anybody does stick with it and work through it, they'll discover a whole different side of painting. Then I realized that I enjoyed teaching. I never really quite pictured myself as teaching art and it's just grown since then. And I would say over the past five, six years, teaching has become a big part of my practice as a professional artist.

Alexis: Yeah, that's really amazing. So can you give me an example of what you actually teach in your courses and what kinds of artists or kinds of people I should say like your ideal client, take your course.

Malcolm: There's one part that I mentioned in my previous answer and that was referring to art as a language and I think that's very important to look at it in that way. Although you are communicating instead of with words, you using mediums like oil paint, a water color to put the marks on your canvas, you're actually communicating as you would with a language. If you're learning English for example, as a beginner, you would find it very difficult to write a Shakespeare play. Instead you'd be trying to figure out how to order coffee and tea or buy basic things. So by having somebody teach you a language step by step of what's really important. How to formulate your sentences and get the word order correct. That sort of thing. So that's, really the essence of how I approach painting.

Malcolm: And it's not about teaching somebody how to paint in oils. It's how to teach somebody to paint, because the language of painting is fundamentally the same. Just like with the example about learning English for instance. It doesn't matter if you're going to write a book or sing a song, you are still using the same language. So it's not about teaching somebody to paint a portrait or paint a landscape. You can do all of those things if you understand the fundamentals of the language of painting. So I'm trying to teach them how to observe and critically, to see like an artist. Most of us see things, but we don't actually observe them. We don't see the, the lights and the darks. We don't see the shape and we don't see the color temperature. We don't really notice the edges of the shapes. For instance. Are they hard or soft? Do they disappear? Things like that. It's amazing.

Malcolm: You know, when you, when you start doing this type of work and these types of studies, you see the whole world completely differently. So that's, really it. I'm not trying to teach somebody to look at a tree as just a bunch of leaves or branches and twigs. You'll be looking at a tree completely differently as a series of shapes of lights and darks and, and different colors, edges, things like that. That is the fundamental beginning. And from there, once you've got those basics you are going to be working on them probably the rest of your painting life. But it gets to a point where a lot of it is second nature and you really start going into the finer nuances of painting and it just keeps going and going and going. You know, there's no real end to it, but the pleasure does increase as you master that language.

Alexis: So the people who are coming to you and taking your classes, are, they, does it range from beginners to more advanced? And with that, this language that you're talking about, is it your language that you've developed that you're sharing with them? And then they can take that and let it merge with what they already know or you know, how does that or they develop their own.

Malcolm: That's quite an important distinction. Firstly, I'll work with beginners mostly and then also into intermediate level. A lot of beginners have been painting for many years, but the, those stuck are stuck on one level. They're painting the same. They're using the same approach, putting the same marks down on a canvas, but they're not actually making progress. Very often you need someone else to step in and help you and to show you perhaps where you've been stuck, but you haven't realized you stuck. You know what I mean? So there's a lot of beginners and intermediates that have plateaued and need to take the next step. I wouldn't say there's a lot of advanced painters that's hard to actually say when somebody is intermediate or advanced. Advanced painters who already have these concepts in place and they're really at a professional level. They tend to want to do their own thing.

Malcolm: So it's mostly beginners, intermediates, and then as far as the language itself is concerned, no, it's not something I've dreamt up. These are lessons that have been passed on in many cases over centuries. Especially over the late 19th, early 20th century when art was sort of freed up into what most of us would refer to as the impressionist time. And that's really when I think painting opened up to the world, not as a hidden trade among the art guilds, but that the public could get involved in and start studying. So these are lessons that were applied by artists like Claude Monet and various other impressionists. Many well known and famous realist painters from the early 20th century as well. And quite a few famous artists that American listeners would be familiar with like, John Carlsson and John Singer Sargent and early 20th century masters like that. So these are fundamentals that they were teaching and learning and applying, but I think a lot of it was lost over the past 20, 30 years.

Alexis: Why do you think that is? This is very interesting to me because my, my father was a fine artist. It's really kind of hitting a chord with me because growing up he was so focused on what you're describing and talking about the different techniques of these people. And now I'm curious to know why you think this has gone away.

Malcolm: I'm just going to jump in and make a few very broad and general statement. So I won't offend anyone. But you know, the idea that you could pick up a brush and just start painting and your whole soul would just come out. Whatever you did was great because that was self expression. And I'm all for spontaneous and fun painting, but it's a different matter entirely if you take that approach and then you want to put your work forward, for example, to a gallery and they turn around and reject it. It's unpleasant. you've enjoyed this painting, but it's not really at a level that we can market for you as a professional. And then a lot of artists would perhaps be upset about that.

Malcolm: So that's just one example of perhaps not being aware that you need to know the rules of painting. And I know a lot of people don't like to hear the word rules of painting, but you know, that's just simply a convenient word to use. You can break the rules, but you got to know the rule first and know why you breaking it. So that's also takes learning and practice. Also to get the confidence to know maybe what was done traditionally and then to change it or try something different. So I think a lot just came down to the fact that people thought that learning the dreary stuff, learning the hard work and practicing certain techniques was too much. They perhaps thought they didn't have the time or simply didn't have access to teachers that could pass those lessons on.

Malcolm: You know that there is not a lot of classes being offered in this sort of teaching. There's plenty of classes where you can go to and simply paint and just have fun and meet your friends and socialize. And that's fantastic. It's a way to decompress et cetera. But that is, as I say, that is not painting at a high level. If that's what you aspire to then, you have to seek out these top lessons. If you are fortunate, you can attend workshops or mentor with someone like that in your town or city. But hopefully I've given the answer your question without upsetting anyone.

Alexis: No, I think that it, it's just so interesting and I, I've, I love the fact that in spite of that, you know, what we may think is available, that there are plenty of places you can still go and get this kind of information specifically with your course and then all the other places. I'm sure you reference within your course.

Malcolm: Yes. I suppose because I'm in it all the time and I'm very familiar with a lot of well known artists around the world and the work they're doing. So to me it seems like there's plenty of barriers to learn these things. But as I said right at the beginning when I started out, I didn't know how to access all of these sources of knowledge. There's actually very few really great artists that are out there relatively speaking. I mean, in America, let's say you've got a thousand really competent top notch artists that, for example, appear in your trade magazines et Cetera, but that's still a very small number. So, you know, it's, it's, it's tough to access these types of lessons and these top of mentors. Some are very hard to get hold of or they may be prohibitively expensive. Firstly it's just good to know what you need to look for. I think that's a big thing already and then you can decide whether the person is right for you or find somebody else who's going to be teaching something similar. So you must want to look for it.

Alexis: Yes. I think that is really the key. I think that we can so easily as artists and creatives take it for granted that there's more than what's just right in front of us or what's presented to us. I mean, I, I really feel it's kind of the reason I started my whole company because we are never taught as artists how to sell our work or run the business side of things and that information is hard to find it, although the resources are there, it's just not, they're not all in one place and they're not all easy to access. So with that said, I'm curious, how have you built the business side of what you do? How did that, like, was that an organic, they just sort of evolved naturally or what was, did you have a strategy?

Malcolm: Probably quite organic, but you know, when I, I think it was really in the nineties, that's when I started to really think about business. I had some pressing reasons to do that. I'd just got married, starting a family and that's a big reality check and things just didn't fall into my lap as I thought they would. And as a young person I had to get down to finding out exactly what business was about. I've always enjoyed entrepreneurship. As a kid, with my friends, I would sell things. I loved selling things and getting some pocket money. The idea of earning a bit of extra money was always an attractive one. But yeah, as a grownup you needed a bit more. There's many other pressing issues. I also had to work at art and to be honest, I did not really have a clue.

Malcolm: And this was, let's say in the mid nineties or so. I came across a big book launch of American author Robert Kiyosaki. He's obviously quite well known now. But at, at the time he was extremely popular and he is obviously still famous. He visited South Africa as well. And he was on tv and cetera. And, and I got a copy of his book, Rich Dad, Poor Dad. And I read that and it was like, you know, as the old cliché goes, it was the light bulb moment. I think the big lesson learned straight away reading that was that at some point for an artist you have to make things happen yourself. You have to stop looking at others. You have to understand as he was putting it in his book, the difference between assets and liabilities.

Malcolm: How do you use money? How to appreciate what people were looking for? So that was a key start. And I think the other key was that I had to stop looking at making a living as an employee. As an artist I had to understand that I was running my own business. I had to lead from the front. All the clichés you can think of, but there's simply no other way to put it. You have to actually get up and go to work and work on your business. You can work on your paintings later. You may have to set aside one part of your day to actually work on your business. You're not in a business. You are actually the engine that is making the business happen. A huge mindset change. Yes, completely. But it's also extremely liberating to know that I couldn't sit around and blame other people or circumstances. I am free to do exactly what I want to earn, whatever I want within some sort of reason of course.

Malcolm: I could make what I needed to to make. I knew that if I was to make enough money to pay the rental by the end of the month I had to do something creative. In the business sense, not just as an artist. So yeah that just started things going on. But unfortunately I did not come across anyone teaching artists or creative people about business. You know, you had to figure that out yourself. It was always, well, I'm an artist. I'm not interested in doing an MBA. You talked to many, many other artists and the very thought of sitting down and discussing money matters was completely taboo. Either you're rude to talk about that sort of thing and it wasn't good manners or you were boring. If people bought your stuff its great. If people weren't buying your art they were all philistines and the world was against you.

Malcolm: All things to avoid the real issue and that was simply to educate yourself and to try things out and not be afraid. And so many artists are just simply afraid of looking foolish. Trying things of a business nature that is going to back fire. Maybe they feel it's going to kill their creativity, take up valuable time? The amount of excuses is never ending. And then there's also the thought that, well, those that do make it just got lucky. They were lucky to be found. They were sort of anointed and could be the celebrity artists and everyone else sits around and waits. For me anyway, it's just simply been a case of working at it and then things happen, they just do. They take you by surprise, you'd be shocked. But things do happen when you stir the pot, you know. There was nobody like you offering this type of business course. It was just general business or entrepreneurial type things. Obviously there is a lot of information out there on the internet. But of course if you can sift through all of it and make sense of it that is an achievement.

Alexis: It truly is, you know, I just think back to how long it took me to figure everything out. So if you're an entrepreneur and you just have a product to sell and you're really excited about it and you get into the whole entrepreneur mindset, you know, you can easily find a community of people who are doing the same thing and you're no longer alone. So you almost have so much more permission to test and just put things out there and see what happens. But as an artist, as you're saying, it's super hard or used to be even harder to find that kind of community because nobody wanted to talk about it and nobody knew. So if you had a specific skill set around that, you were kind of forced to join a community of people who you didn't really mesh with. It was just sort of a little more piecemeal. So it's nice to be where we are now and just have more of these resources and communities available.

Malcolm: Oh yes. The opportunities are just huge And there's been such an Incredible change in mindset even in the past two to three years. When I started as a painter, everyone simply wanted a gallery that would do all the work for you and make you famous. Maybe you'd get a government grant, which would keep you living comfortably in your loft somewhere. You would be painting you'd get invited by all these kinds of organizations that were just there to make you famous and wealthy without really working at it. It's amazing how many artists had that sort of idea, especially young artists coming out who thought that. Many expecting arts grants and what have you that would help them and then the grants didn't materialize.

Malcolm: And then of course the galleries have also changed fundamentally. Most of them simply looked at artists as supplying them with free stock for their gallery and then they wanted 50 percent commission. And that's the hard truth of it. There extremely few gallery owners out there that are interested in going to the trouble of launching someone's career. So you can view that either as a real blow to your aspirations or look at as a real opportunity and a gift to make your own brand and make your own story happen. But that requires education. So if they can, for example, learn from you how to access that opportunity and all of that power that artists have in their hands right now, it's simply a case of how to use it effectively.

Alexis: Yeah. It is such an opportunity because you have ultimately more control for the long term when you do that and you have, you know, for the gallery there, like a PR company, they're not going to share their list with you because that's, that's what builds their companies. So you know, you're not going to have access like you would if you had your own to your clients and for, for the future. So it's very interesting. I'll have to ask you, what has been the most fulfilling experience you've had coaching and teaching these courses that you teach? I know it's a hard question.

Malcolm: It is fairly easy to answer - simply getting the feedback from artists all over the world. And very often that happens just at the right time when you might not be feeling too inspired. Or getting down on yourself and then there's a message in the inbox from somebody on the other side of the world thanking me for helping them. And going to the trouble of putting these lessons out there. Or it could be for just teaching them about a silly thing like how to mix a certain color. Then you get somebody who's new to art saying it was just what they were looking for. So I'm delighted and you realize that it's those little things that make it worthwhile. It's not holding out for some major award or winning a competition or things like that. It's actually having real people coming back to and taking the trouble to tell you, "thank you, I really appreciate what you've taught me." What else what else can you really want as a teacher? That's it.

Alexis: Yeah, that's pretty amazing. I, I couldn't agree more. I feel the same. I feel the exact same. How can everybody listening learn more about your courses and see your work? Where can we reach you?

Malcolm: Okay. My website www.malcolmdeweyfineart.com and I've got all my painting courses listed there. Plus lots of other information. Also take a look at my Painting Courses page on my website. I recommend flow starting with the fundamentals I've already been talking about in the course called Learn to Paint With Impact. I've covered a few other topics like painting outdoors as well. Also something for acrylic painters. It's not just all oil painting. I'm always open to people sending me pictures of the work they are working on or asking for a comment now and then. So it's a very much back and forth type of relationship once people start working on the courses.

Malcolm: I do have a mentor program myself where I work one on one with other artists who want to work live over the internet with me and get personal feedback on their paintings. It works over a period of time where we perhaps focus on one thing. That obviously is more time intensive, but that can also be a considerable help to certain artists who are looking for guidance as well. So there's something for everyone. I do start off with some, some free lessons as well, which you can also find on the website.

Alexis: That's fantastic. So it's malcolmdeweyfineart.com

Malcolm: That's right,

Alexis: yes. So we'll have that link in the show notes below, but if you just want to type it in right now, you can. And Malcolm, thank you so much for being here. I'm so appreciative because this is such, not only a valuable conversation, but truly inspiring for those who are starting out or have put art down for awhile and maybe feeling like they can't come back to it.

Malcolm: Thanks Alexis. I hope it does help. If any artists are thinking about getting back into painting or wondering if they should even bother, you just simply have to start and let it develop naturally from the love that.

Alexis: Yes!