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Diving to Paint

by

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"Until I realized that air bubbles were floating up from my mouth piece, I had forgotten that I was sitting on the ocean floor 25 feet underwater. The painting that I was doing was so engrossing and soothing." That was the feeling when the first Underwatercolourtm was produced on that beautiful, late summer afternoon in the Bahamas while SCUBA diving in the Fowl Cay sea preserve in 1982.

Underwatercolourtm paintings are a challenge but also fun to produce. These are actual paintings done underwater, on site, that portray the impression of a diver's environment.

Why do we paint Underwatercolourstm ? We sought to combine the enjoyment of SCUBA diving and our profession as artists and researchers. Of course, this method of painting took time to formulate. Previous to our experiences, we had only heard twice of this rare art form; once, during a Jacques Cousteau documentary, a diver was filmed painting underwater. Secondly, a similar artist was described to us by Capt. Skeet LaChance, our diving guru in the Bahamas. However, we never saw any of the paintings that they produced. To actually make underwater painting a reality for us was a cumulative result of our own artistic abilities and of being inspired and prompted by Skeet.

Besides being a rare art form, painting underwater provides us with a unique contact with the marine world. Imagine sitting on the sea floor, painting for an hour. By that time, fish know that we are not predators and curiously swim near to investigate. The relationships of fish and their behavioral characteristics can be studied while viewing and painting reef communities. This is one way for a diver/painter to become more of the marine world.

In order to accomplish our artistic endeavors, we naturally chose oil as the painting medium. But to select a good surface to paint on was a challenge and required a lot of thought. We reflected on our knowledge of how painting components age and whether a painting remains bonded to its surface. To experiment, we grabbed some surplus, epoxy-coated plywood, which happened to be on our sailboat, and dove overboard to paint. The painting and combination of materials were a success!

Practically any surface can be used provided it doesn't trap or absorb salt water. Any salt may, in time, cause mildew and/or chemical damage to both paint and surface and therefore decrease the life of the artwork. After each dive, we rinsed our Underwatercolours™ in fresh water and then let them air dry normally. These paintings are also rinsed well after submersion in chlorinated water when painting in a pool, and presumably, should be rinsed after diving in mineral-rich fresh water.

Working with oil paints is a lot different in sea water than in air. First of all, we are not yet able to use turpentine or paint thinners while underwater. This means that we use the oil paints straight from the tubes, while diving, or before diving transfer the oil paints to plastic squeeze bottles and pour in turpentine for thinning. A palette can be used as an intermediate step between tube (or plastic squeeze bottle) and painting surface, in order to blend colors. But we almost always use our fingers to apply and blend the paint directly onto the painting surface. Finger painting is a simple, enjoyable method which produces interesting color blends and highlights reflecting from the three-dimensional textures. Traditional oil brushes clot underwater; that is, paint sticks to the brushes more than it sticks to the painting surface. Although a palette knife can be used, we prefer finger painting. The paintings accompanying this article were all done with our fingers.

Doing the first few Underwatercolours™ required some juggling while diving. We had to handle paint tubes, palette, and wooden painting surface while swimming, searching for a good position from which to paint. Attaching all of this paraphernalia to a traditional easel would have worked provided that it was sufficiently weighted and wasn't moved once set up underwater. Just picture an ordinary easel floating away with the current! To avoid such comic mistakes, we started very simply, holding palette and small painting board in one hand, leaving the other hand free for squeezing paint tubes and painting. This was a simplified

beginning and a sound approach for studying the reaction of oil paint applied underwater.

Later, while speaking with an artist friend (W. Toler) about our Underwatercolourstm, the three of us invented the Seaseltm. This is a very portable easel made of PVC piping and nylon cord to which the Underwatercolourstm can be attached. The Seaseltm makes painting underwater much easier; we can swim and move about with this rig, keeping the paints, painting board, palette and wiping cloth all attached to the light-weight frame. Once settled to paint, the Seaseltm can be tied on to the diver's body and is very controllable. We designed the Seaseltm to facilitate painting while sitting on the ocean floor or floating, suspended, off an underwater cliff or wall. However, at depths over 33 feet, dive time is critical and repeated dives may be necessary to complete the painting. Of course, this type of diving should not be attempted unless a diver is fully acquainted with his (her) equipment and, preferably, certified for open water diving.

Intentionally our artistic dives are coordinated with optimal weather conditions. We avoid using artificial lighting such as the bright lamps used in underwater photography. Instead, we prefer viewing the reefs and marine life in natural light, which of course depends on diving depth, atmospheric and cloud conditions and underwater turbulence. Even the clear turquoise waters of the Bahamas change color and clarity from day to day. Painting on site with natural light truly portrays the marine environment as it is enjoyed by most of us who dive.

For several years we have enjoyed doing watercolour painting and pen & ink drawings of different locales wherever we travel. The more we draw and paint, the more we see and feel in that particular location. Therefore, it was natural for us to expand and deepen our diving experiences by painting marine environments. We eagerly look forward to future SCUBA diving trips and the enjoyment of painting more Underwatercolourstm.

Captions for photography

1. Watercolour painting by author W. W. Buck. This explicitly illustrates one of the authors painting underwater, using the specially designed easel (Seaseltm).



2. Underwatercolourtm of L. A. Horn



3. Underwatercolourtm of W. W. Buck

