

Interview with Watercolor Artist and Teacher Alyssa Whetstone

1. When did you discover that you had a passion for art and creativity and wanted to have that as a major part of your life or a career?

“I’ve always enjoyed making art. I was always that kid who art class was my favorite class in school for sure. In high school, I went through a few different things trying to think about what I was going to do in college. I thought about interior design for a little bit, I thought about just being a teacher in general. I started my college career with visual art education and elementary education as a double major, but then I decided to drop the elementary-ed and just do art education. So, that is what I graduated with and today I still am an elementary art teacher - that is technically my full-time job. So, I thought that my creativity would mainly continue in teaching art. I did, at the end of high school, do my first art fair. I had a highschool art teacher who was like, ‘Hey, you can do this art fair as a high schooler and it is free for high schoolers specifically’ but it was like one of the big art fairs. So, I thought *that sounds fun*. So, I did that and really enjoyed meeting people and talking to them about my art. I was like, oh I can sell my art to people and they actually want to buy it. So, that was really eye opening, but I didn’t really think I could do it as a career, so I went into teaching. Then, about two years into teaching, I finally had enough time for myself again (as a teacher it is a lot of time outside of work), so I was able to start—actually on evenings and weekends and summers—having time to stuff other than preparing lesson plans. So, I started doing my own art again and I started looking for fairs and stuff again, and I rediscovered that business side of art, not just as a hobby. I’ve always enjoyed being creative, painting, and drawing. I jumped between mediums growing up, but right now watercolor and pen is definitely my favorite. I like the business side of things too now, I started discovering that it is fun to learn the business-side of things. Painting the art—for me—is about the people who see it. It’s not just for me. I enjoy getting to talk to people about what it is, so it’s not just that I paint for fun. I do paint to share it with people and to sell it too.”

2. Obviously, your preferred medium is watercolor, how did you get into that specifically?

“I painted in acrylic mainly through high school and college. Then, in one of my painting courses in college we had to try a bunch of different painting mediums. So we had to do oil, we had to do watercolor, we had to do gouache, we had to try all these different things. I didn’t love watercolor then. Backing up, I did take one weekend watercolor lesson in high school from a painter in Wisconsin that my grandparents are friends with and he is a watercolor artist. I did a class with him and at first I thought it was really cool, but it was also way harder than acrylic and I didn’t know what I was doing. So, I had some supplies from that class, but I didn’t really use them again. Then, fast forward to being a teacher and the pandemic hits. I was also dealing with some personal health problems at the time. I was chair bound for a few months and I couldn’t really walk around much. The convenience of watercolor became the most appealing part. I could sit at my desk and paint with watercolor without having to get up to go wash my brush or worry about my paint drying out if I had to go do something. So, the convenience made me

actually pick it up again and then I was like, wait a minute, this isn't just convenient it is actually really fun. So, I started drawing with it. I kind of missed drawing - with acrylic there was a lot less drawing and it was more about painting. I enjoy drawing, so being able to mix the pen and the watercolor I could do both drawing and painting. So, it was a way to combine both of those things. I am able to do it on the go more often, it was convenient, and so I just happened to do it, fell in love with it, and kept running with it from there."

3. Where did you go to college?

"I went to Bethel University in St. Paul."

4. So, you are a teacher, an artist, an illustrator, and you also host painting classes.

How do you balance it all?

"I am a 'yes person' which is not always the way to be. So, as I mentioned early, as a teacher—at first especially—there is no time for anything else. My first two years in public school, teaching was all that my creative energy, all that my brain power could do. Once I was able to get more established in that routine I had a little more time to just make art in general. Once I figured out how to make that art, then it was like, okay, now I have a little more time to sell the art and that kind of thing. Once I learned how to sell the art I was like, I want to figure out how to sell other things. Like, how to make stickers of my art, how to make prints of my art. It was very much one thing at a time to kind of add to my plate, because once I figured out one thing then I'd have more mental space and actual time to do something else because I'd get faster at the first thing. So it was kind of adding one thing at a time. Now that I have the art fair, selling art and knowing how to do that it was like okay how do I sell it online, how do I market myself online. So, adding like the Instagram stuff and figuring out email marketing, the website, and all of that. Then, from there, working with Instagram and trying to figure out how that whole world works, I learned that people like to learn on Instagram, not just absorb content. Since I'm a teacher I was like, actually I'm good at teaching, and I like sharing my art, so why don't I teach people how to make art online? So, a year ago—it was January 2023—I kind of switched my Instagram from just sharing my own personal art and what I was making to, hey, you can do this too, here's a tutorial, here's a painting, here's how you can do it well. That was really well received. I was kind of reminded that I know how to teach things and that makes sense, so I kind of started to roll with that a little more. I realized, oh I could actually teach people outside of the public classroom. Adults really like this. A lot of people responding to my videos were like, 'I'm retired and I'm just picking up the paint brush for the first time and it's so much fun!' I was like, I love that! And I wanted everyone to paint—and watercolor people especially don't like to paint with unless they are in elementary school. Like, I teach my elementary schoolers how to use watercolor, and people don't pick up a watercolor palette again. That just isn't seen unless someone finds it and wants to do it, but it's just not thought about very often. So, people seem excited to touch back to that medium they once did as a five-year-old and now they get to do it again. So, I started then, I had moved to a new home the summer of 2023, and one of the new things that I got in my home was this space here behind me and it's my art studio space. When looking, I specifically looked for a space big enough where I could have groups over and teach classes. So, I set it up so that I

could have small groups in my space. I was like, ‘great, I can teach classes, I don’t have to pay for a space, so even if it doesn’t work out, or people don’t show up it’s still fine.’ So, I started teaching in this space and then I realized that I also like to use my studio for my own stuff. So, I started looking for other places to teach and started finding some places around the cities to teach classes at, so that this could become my own studio space again. I still do some classes here, but I kind of added that to my plate. Then, more recently I’ve been looking at ways to teach art online as well. So, creating actual courses, not just free tutorials on Instagram and YouTube (though I still do those as well). It has been very much a slow like figuring one thing out at a time and adding things as I go. Figuring out what people are responding to, oh people like to learn, so now I’m creating products like workbooks where people can actually learn by doing. So, if they don’t want to take a class they can just buy the book and do it on their own. Or, when I am at an art fair, I can sell the learning in an actual physical product and if people don’t have to sign up for a class that can just take the book home and work on it. So, trying to figure out where I can continue to grow both the in-person stuff like the fairs—I’ve got that figured out, but I can still add things to it—or online presence, how can I actually make money by selling courses and things like that. I would say I am very overwhelmed because I say yes to too many things. I am working towards being an entrepreneur full-time, so that is on my plan because I do think I’ll be able to handle all the things I want to do more easily and I’ll obviously put more effort into it because I’ll have more time. The illustrating—the book projects—kind of showed up once I was better at marketing myself online. So the first book I illustrated was when someone found me on Instagram, they were looking for a Minnesota painter, and so I had advertised myself very much as a Minnesota watercolor artist. So, that’s how I was found originally. Then, after the first book, someone else found me and now I’ve done two books with that person. So it was kind of word-of-mouth, one project at a time. When I took on a book, I had to say no to commissions. So for a long time I was doing custom paintings, especially house portraits, people love it, it’s a big thing. I love it too, but I didn’t have time to do one commission if I have like fifteen book pages. They are basically a lot of commissions. So I had to kind of give up some things when I am doing different things, but a longer illustration project is a bigger commission and it’s more likely to be long-term guaranteed work. So, I was like this makes sense over something else. So, some give and take in that sense. This year I am going to try to do fewer art fairs—get more picky—now that I am also doing classes. So, it is like, as I add things I kind of have to make room for them, until I’m doing this full-time, then I’ll have more room for all of it again of course.”

5. How much time do you set aside for yourself in a day or in a week to make art?

“What I have done, or found by chance, is events or communities where I go make art with other people is where I make art for myself, because I can’t be recording it, I’m not on my computer doing email or doing something else, it’s like, no I’m bringing stuff to make with other people and we are here to chat and hangout. So those are my designated art-making times. Once a month on a Monday evening I do that with a bunch of friends in St. Paul. We all get together in a space and we just bring a project to work on for a couple hours and chat. So I usually bring my sketchbook and to-go painting supplies, so it’s just very low-key and I just draw and paint stuff.

Sometimes it's like, oh I'm painting an example for a future class, but oftentimes it's for myself too. It kind of depends how stressed I am at the time in determining which one I want to do. I also have another community in my church that's also in St. Paul. It's just a bunch of artists and we talk business sometimes and sometimes we just get together and paint. So, most of the time if I am doing it for myself, I do it with other people because if I am alone I am recording a tutorial or I am working on business stuff. The social aspect of it is how I make sure I am actually doing it for myself. So that is almost scheduled into my month because it is events where I meet with people. It makes it so it's like I have to do this because it's scheduled, versus when I find an extra hour at home it's like I have things to check off my to-do list and there's other stuff I have to do."

6. Are there any specific times of day, locations, or things you need to do to be in your best creative head space?

"I'd be curious to find out what my answer is when I am doing this all day, because right now I work until 4:15, so I don't get home until 4:30 or so and now it is lighter out longer. I used to get home and it was like an hour before it was dark out and I was like 'oh, I don't want to do anything.' So definitely when it's light out I think I am more creative. I just moved my desk so it's by the window of my studio. So, right now I am staring outside and I love that. I love the natural light, I've got birds in my bird feeder right now that I am obsessed with, so it's fun to see those, and that kind of stuff is very inspiring to see nature. Most of my art is inspired by reality, nature, and things I see. So, like this weekend I just got home from teaching a class this morning and so it's like, oh I plan on doing some creating in my studio today because it's light out, I've got daylight, I have a longer chunk of time to work, which is always nice. Fitting it in, in little bits, I usually don't sit down to paint if I only have an hour. Even though it doesn't take me that long to paint, I like to have designated time. So I'll do computer work, or I'll do organizing, or I'll do something else if I only have a short amount of time. The time of day, I don't really know, because I do have to fit it in where it goes right now, but being in nature or having daylight, even being with others - I feel like I am more creative with other people who are also creating. Having time to meet with people is helpful because I am inspired by what they are doing and the conversations we have, and sharing supplies, it all gives me new ideas and stuff like that. So, inspired by people and nature."

7. How would you describe your art to someone who has never seen it?

"I would describe it as realistic. I definitely focus on realism. It's illustrative. It's a drawing. There's a lot of line work. I enjoy the contrast that the pen creates with the watercolor, so it's pen and watercolor. I definitely work from reality, often from reference photos. So I go somewhere, I take pictures, and then I work from those pictures. So my final painting does look like the picture, however it's slightly more simplified because of the line work. So I am looking for the main shapes and edges and things like that. The colors tend to be fairly natural. Not super vibrant or exaggerated. I like to neutralize things. I tend to add brown to my colors and make them a little less saturated. I am leaning more into the watercolor in a sense of like I try to let the watercolor do what it does because it does a lot of pretty things on its own, but I started off using it as a coloring device. So, I'm trying to lean more into working with fun blooms and the

interesting hard edges and trying to get a little more loose with it, but it depends on the piece if you can really see that depending on when I created it because I do that more now than maybe I did it in the past. Typically, I do landscapes. I do work on some—I call them—joyful moments or joyful objects, like just things or still lifes that I’ll do sometimes, but typically landscapes or at least nature-based is what most of the subject-matter is. Not people or animals. Those are both not my favorite things to do.”

8. You do a ton of art for other people. How do you balance that personal expression that represents you and your artistic style with the needs of your buyer or that commercial aspect of it?

“I definitely don’t have this figured out by any means, because I definitely do make my art for other people and I think that’s not stereotypical of artists. A stereotypical artist makes art for themselves and doesn’t matter what other people think. Like, I am gonna make what I am gonna make, and it doesn’t matter whether people like it or not. For me, I thrive off of the connection with people. If people don’t really like my art, I’m not really having fun making it. I really enjoy what people think about it because I do like connections. I am a very extroverted artist, which is also not stereotypical. Usually, we like to be in our own little spaces, and it’s like, well sure, but I like meeting people. I like meeting people and talking with people and stuff like that. So, I think, yes, I am influenced by what people think because that motivates me and I need those conversations, but I think my subject matter is how I express myself, so to speak. I am going to pick places that I know. So, I almost always paint places I’ve been or places that I have memories of. Because of that, I do a lot of Minnesota-based stuff. Other people also tend to know those places because I am local and I sell locally. So, that’s where I can still have my own personal experience with it and I get some really cool connections with it. Same with my objects or things, like I love painting books and just cute things that I enjoy, teacups and shelves and things that look pretty and cute. It’s the subject matter where I get to express what I enjoy. I like looking at nature and looking at beautiful surroundings, so I always say half of the fun of painting for me is the looking. So when I have a picture I get to stare at it for a long time and I get to see all the little veins in the leaf, and I get to see the shadows, and I get to see the light. That is so much fun. If I didn’t know how to paint I would probably just stare at pictures a lot. That’s really fun for me is to notice and painting helps me notice. So when I recreate something I have to look at it. So, the process of painting from a picture is really enjoyable for me and I get to experience nature by painting it. So, that’s—not really expressing myself, but it’s—how I find joy in the process or in painting is looking and recreating something.”

9. Have you ever had a creative block and if so, how did you overcome it? If not, what do you think keeps your creative juices flowing?

“Probably. I can’t think of a time where I couldn’t make art, but like—right now, because I am more in business mode—if I have a creative block, I don’t think I acknowledge it because I just do everything else I think I should be doing. I do my emails, I do my marketing, I get the fair set up. So, yes, because if I don’t know what to do I do other things. I have a list of things to paint, but I don’t always feel like painting them either. So, it is in that sense of, oh I don’t know what to do. I

definitely think when I was teaching my first few years there was a lot of like, it was a creative block almost because my brain was too full. It was like I didn't have space to think of things to create because I was busy creating my class lessons and coming up with lesson ideas and creating examples. It was fun and creative and all of my energy went to the classroom which was important and necessary at the time, but it meant that nothing I was creating was for me and I wasn't making new pieces for others either. So, I think my creative blocks come when I don't have the mental space to create, when I am just too busy with other things. This happens more often than it should because I'm a "yes person". So, I tend to overcommit myself and then not have any actual time to create."

10. What piece or moment of your artistic journey are you most proud of and what is the story behind it?

"Two things kind of come to mind. One is my Minnesota series in general, all the ones of Minnesota places. I love adding to that series. The first one in that series was the Stonedge Bridge painting and so that still has a special spot for me because it was like the first and I've continued to add. So, it was kind of me figuring out that I love painting places that I know. It was kind of the beginning of that, so I think that was pretty special and still is. It is fun to look back and see how that first painting started versus my most recent ones. They all still go together, and yet my style has developed, improved, and changed, but they still feel somewhat cohesive, which is kind of fun to see. I've never really known what my style is, but I can now see over a few years that I do at least have a style. So, it's been nice to see that and that is a significant thing. I am proud of that series. The other thing I think of is the workbooks I am creating. Being able to create stuff for people to learn and paint in is amazing. I get to draw fun things, paint the fun things, and then I get to use my teacher-brain to create a format and a product that people can find success in. I love that connection - being able to say you can paint things and hear them say yes I can. I love when other people get to experience the joy of painting. I am very proud of the workbooks and it is fun to see people get excited about them. I've had people buy them for others because they think we enjoy them as a gift. It makes me happy that people want to spread and share this way of learning and these opportunities. So, creating actual resources for people has been really fulfilling because I do love the teaching-side of things, so having those together has been really cool - figuring out how to combine them and the art of making itself. So those are the two projects that I am most proud of."

11. What has been the most challenging part of your artistic journey?

"I mean, doing all the things at the same time is always challenging. I do love the business side of things. Trying to run a business as an artist is really fun and exciting, but it is definitely one of the hardest parts as well. It's hard for me to say what's challenging because I do love it so much, but that doesn't mean it's not challenging. I do love the challenge of creating it and there's just so many different parts that have to go in, learning how to become a business person, learning how to market, figuring out taxes and incoming and all that stuff (in the process of figuring it out) and how to organize my life around it and figure out what's most important and what events do I go to, what events do I not go to. Balancing it all is probably the hardest part, because I love every

part of it and I don't know what to give up or what to make room for. As I mentioned earlier, if I add one thing I kind of have to make room for it and it is very hard to make room for it because I want to do all of the things. I think a lot of us as creatives want to do all of the things. We want to try, explore, and pursue and that is great, but if you do want to make a career or money as an artist there is some limit to figuring out what it is you want to do. That doesn't mean you'll only do one thing, but you can't do thirty things. I am motivated because it's fun and yet it's challenging, which keeps life interesting. If it got boring and easy, I'd be tired of it eventually. I don't want to be tired of it, I want to keep doing it. Watercolor itself—I always say—is easy to learn right away and be successful at, and yet you will never stop learning how to use it. You can take watercolor so far, and yet it can be really pretty when you first start. So, I love the range of the medium that I can continue to push myself and get better and better, and that I am not going to get tired of that. It's not like I've mastered it, and yet I am still able to make successful things that I can sell. So, the medium itself is very challenging in a good way where it has room to grow.”

12. I'm interested in illustrating in the future myself, how was that process?

“I don't know much about that world. The one's I've been involved with are both self-published authors, so I don't know how it works with publishing companies and all that good stuff. I have a good friend who edits children's books and is in that world of publishing, so at some point, I've asked her for different resources and companies to look into. For my experience, having myself be seen was helpful. I didn't know it was helpful at the time, but I had started to grow my marketing as just an artist. I think I've called myself an illustrator before just because my style is more illustrative, so it feels like I'm illustrating these places, and I was found because of my location specifically. I don't know if that's usually the case, but this author was looking for a Minnesota artist. I feel like some self-published authors would enjoy working with an artist that lives close by, so that makes sense too. At first—since I had no experience in that world whatsoever—we talked, we met in person, and she basically showed me a previous book she had done and told me what she had paid the previous illustrator for that book. I was like, I can't do that, but let me go home and determine what I can do. Because I already did commissions at this point, I was like, I know what one of my single, custom paintings is worth and in my head I was like, oh I can give her a bulk discount, but I wasn't willing to do it for the original amount she was offering. So, it was kind of a negotiation and I still wasn't sure if what I was going to offer was fair or not, but I felt comfortable doing it. I was like this is my first time illustrating a book, so I'm not going to charge her expert rates and she wanted me to do people and I don't draw people. So that project was interesting, because she had the books written and basically said this is how many pages I want, have fun with it. So, I didn't get any direction as to which things to illustrate from the book or any of that. So, it was very much like I had to go through and be like, okay this moment seems important, I am going to illustrate that for this page and that kind of stuff. It worked out fine, and that was good for my first one because I was kind of exploring. When the second offer reached out, it was a very different experience. He sent me a powerpoint that had google images dropped in with like, I want this and I want this, and with lists of things

to include, and I want this on this page and this person facing this way. It was extremely detailed and I was very overwhelmed. But then I realized, this is actually great, because then I could make sure I was living up to what his expectations were, whereas with the first author, I didn't know what her expectations were at all. I just gave it to her and it went fine obviously. With the second author, his book was just much more detailed as the plan showed me. So, I quoted him much higher, which I think was good because it took me a lot longer and included a lot more detail and it was longer too. So, I tried to raise the price accordingly, which I don't know how well I'm doing because it's not a standard amount and a standard publishing company that I know what the price should be. I had to make sure I was making enough. So, with him it was a lot more back and forth. I would do a sketch and then send it to him before I did pen. Then, I would do pen and send it to him, then paint and send it to him, and then he'd usually have some things I'd miss, so I would go back and add them. He would also know that I can't erase watercolor, so if there was something that he didn't catch he'd tell me and I'd try to fix it, but I could only do so much after putting paint on. So, it was just about us communicating well to make sure we were on the same page and he knew what my limits were, but also then, me making sure to update him through the process so that he had a chance to catch something if he wanted it different. So that process was just a lot more involved and a lot longer, but fun to see. I mean it is fun to see your stuff in a book, and if you end up writing your own book too, then you get to be in more control of that. As an illustrator for an author it was a lot of communication for my second two projects because it was a lot more detailed, but also fun to like not miss anything either. It wasn't my imagination, it wasn't my story, so I didn't really know what to put in it, so I thought it was actually helpful by the end. It took me a while to catch up to all the details, but eventually it was very helpful to have those lists of things to include and things to have. They are long processes. Both the two longer books took six months each and I was doing them in the evenings and weekends. I had deadlines for both projects so I had to kind of space everything out accordingly and realize oh I need two pages per month to get this done in time and stuff like that. It was very different from working on my own stuff because it is someone else's vision, but it did also push me and I feel like I grew a lot as an artist because I got to try things I wouldn't normally do. There were two pages in the most recent book where it's raining. So, I did the whole thing in watercolor and then used a white pen to do rain, so I am really happy with those pages and that was a fun thing. I've never drawn something where it's been raining or to do reflections in puddles and stuff like that. It pushed me as an artist for sure and it was very different to work with someone else's vision."

13. If you had any advice for your young students or someone like me who is hoping to make art for a living someday, what would it be?

"I think the big thing is just to start. Start selling at a market. Start researching. There's a ton of podcasts and researchers on YouTube and they have so much information to share. It is all out there and it's fun to learn it, it is fun to learn how to market and stuff, but it is a lot of work. So, finding a platform where it is like Pinterest or Instagram, that is the way you market yourself these days is social media. So just starting and watching other people and seeing what they're

doing and learning and doing. Photograph everything you do, take a lot of video - you just need stuff to work with to advertise yourself. Like, on a website, you want to put in-process photos or a picture of you painting. There's this stuff you just don't know you'll need until you're making something. So, document everything. Then, find people in your community, in your life, who are also artists. They don't need to be business artists, but just having other creative people that think like you that you can rant to or you can share business ideas with is really important. Two of my other artist friends are both visual artists and somewhat business. They are both stay-at-home moms that make some money on their paintings but aren't doing it full-time. It's been fun because at first I was learning from them, and now I'm the one in the business almost more, so now they are learning from me. It's been really helpful to just bounce ideas off of each other. It's nice to have some to ask where you buy your paper for prints or how to scan and just figuring out that stuff and being able to talk about it. It is super helpful. I think art fairs are the number one way to get feedback on selling your art or even like talking to people, getting connections, or being like, I'd like to illustrate a book one day. Having that information out there you find so many connections and there's a lot of places where I am in an art fair and someone says 'Oh, your stuff would look really good in this store.' So, I email that store and see what they're up to. You just get a lot of conversations and you get immediate feedback about what people are drawn to and what people aren't. On Instagram, you don't get the initial verbal feedback unless they comment, and they don't do that very often. So, you need to be able to read the person who's walking up to your booth and picking up this piece, but not that one. So, it's important to do the marketing, but also just making lots of art and getting out there is good too. You don't have to be a starving artist. There are lots of ways to make it as an artist in the world, but it does take a business mindset that I don't think we're taught very well as artists. There are resources out there, but you kind of have to find them. So, figuring out how to actually run a business is a lot of what we have to learn how to do. We know how to make art, we know how to make what we like. It is how to sell it, how to market it, how to reproduce it, what avenue do you enter into. So, it is doing one thing at a time and adding to it and growing from there. If you have to do a side gig for a little bit to make it work that is fine, but just know that you can make money doing art. You just have to put the effort in like any other job. You have to pursue it."