



Easy as 1-2-3

Mind in overdrive? The painting kits of your childhood still have so much to offer

Stillness doesn't always come easily to the overactive creative mind. Ideas in full joyful flow might be gratefully received, but taming them to sit within meaningful boundaries can be overwhelming. The inclination to remain in self-perpetuating stagnation, sucked into the ever-present distractions of 21st-century life, is tempting.

But there are certain artistic practices that can gently coax a messy creative mind, embracing your resistance to step away from the noise so that you might arrive on the necessary plane where ideas can take shape. Step forward, painting by numbers. Whether you're an artist looking for a rest from more complicated commissions, a writer craving precious thinking time or an aspiring painter seeking a sense of empowerment and capability, these kits will gently guide you toward the creation of a worthy piece that guarantees not only beauty on the canvas but also serenity of spirit.

Tell me more...

It's commercial artist Dan Robbins that the world has to thank for creating paint-by-number kits. In the late 1940s he was working as a packaging designer for Max Klein, president of the Palmer Paint Company in Detroit, US. Klein was eager to tap into the emerging hobby market, fuelled by a postwar US population with the time and money to devote to leisure.

Robbins, inspired by accounts of Leonardo da Vinci creating numbered backgrounds for his apprentices, came up with the concept of printing an outline and leaving customers to fill in the blanks. Months of trial and error followed as Robbins worked out how best to bring his idea to life, questioning subject matter and complexity of the templates. While early

sales were disappointing, a clever billboard campaign that showed a painting being completed over a number of days meant that by the mid-1950s the concept had taken off.

A welcome break

Elizabeth Raine, a UK-based professional portrait artist, has enjoyed the flexibility and creativity of paint-by-number kits since childhood. 'I've had an array of different types of kits, including traditional paint, but also beads, sequins and even sand. I think sometimes we feel these things from childhood aren't meant for us any more, but personally I believe it's nice to be able to reconnect with this kind of creativity as an adult.' Elizabeth sees kits not only as an accessible entry point for people who might otherwise feel intimidated by painting, but also as an opportunity to rest from her work, which requires intense focus, precision and attention to detail.

'Taking a break by using a medium where I don't have to be overly precise or worry about complicated details can be really refreshing,' she says. 'Painting small sections at a time feels calming and almost meditative, helping me practise mindfulness. It also makes it easier to properly switch off and relax between more demanding commissions.'

Painting as distraction

Integrative therapeutic counsellor Peggy Melmoth knows all too well that creating art without pressure can be incredibly powerful as a mindfulness technique. She founded the Mindful Art Club in Plymouth alongside her friend Emma Sprawson, an experienced mental health professional trained in mindfulness and other complementary therapies. Both hold degrees in art





(Above) Finished kits by Hannah Shaw at Kiwi Paint by Numbers, who makes them from original photos of her native New Zealand, including Tui in Flax Bush (opposite)

and set up their Community Interest Company to improve mental health. ‘Emma and I were working in a residential addiction treatment centre when it unexpectedly closed down, and all the staff were made redundant,’ says Peggy. ‘In the centre Emma had offered guided mindfulness sessions and art lessons, so we decided to combine this with peer support and take our skills out into the community.’

The aim of their weekly art sessions and digital courses is for participants to relax and enjoy the process, not necessarily to create a good piece of art. Peggy explains, ‘There’s a lot of evidence that creating art, particularly in a group setting, significantly improves physical and mental health and reduces depression, anxiety, inflammation and chronic pain, while boosting cognitive function, social connection and resilience.’

In 2022 and 2023 Peggy and Emma spent a year working with a research team at Plymouth University to measure the difference their sessions make. The study found that creative activities such as these provided a distraction from negative thoughts and social anxiety. Emma says: ‘There’s this amazing quote by life coach Martha Beck. She said: “Evidence shows a kind of toggle effect between creativity and anxiety. When one is up and running, the other seems to go silent”, and I’ve totally found that in my own life. You can’t be creative and anxious at the same time. Try it! Draw a wiggly line and worry at the same time. It’s impossible.’

Peggy says the projects that work best are the ones where participants don’t need to make any major decisions. ‘If you

don’t have to decide what to draw, how to draw it or what colours to use, your mind will be free to get into a flow state, becoming absorbed in the activity and often losing track of time.’ This is exactly what a paint-by-number kit can do: take the pressure off, so your mind can roam free.

This state of freedom might also translate to their ease of working, which could explain why similar techniques have been employed through the centuries. As Dan Robbins was keen to acknowledge, Leonardo da Vinci was perhaps an early pioneer, understood to have taught his apprentices proportion and composition using a form of numeric mapping. It’s also said that Michelangelo might have created preparatory drawings for the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, with sections being numbered so that colours could easily be filled in.

Even modern-day artists have shone a light on this technique. Andy Warhol so revered the concept that he created his Do It Yourself series in 1962, while Damien Hirst famously sparked debate in the late 1990s about the use of assistants to create his Spot Paintings. There has, of course, been much debate about whether painting by numbers is a valid form of art, but regardless, just as Dan Robbins said: ‘I never claim that painting by numbers is art. But it is the experience of art.’

A way into creativity

Hannah Shaw, who founded the company Kiwi Paint by Numbers back in 2021 as a way to spread the joy of painting, agrees with this. ‘I started the business after thinking there

must be a much better way to spend downtime during those tedious pandemic lockdowns. While I’d always wanted to create art growing up, I never seemed to have that artistic flair. I realised that with paint by numbers you can create stunning art, no matter your skill level.’

Hannah saw a gap in the paint-by-number kit market for New Zealand landscapes and native bird collections, and she now creates new designs each year by converting original photographs into kits. She maintains that aspiring artists everywhere can benefit from taking the plunge and having a go. ‘Working on the kits definitely grows your confidence with using a paintbrush, and it lifts your self-esteem because you’re able to achieve an artwork that you are proud to show off to

your family and friends.’ Hannah was recently pleased to receive a comment from an artist who attributes his painting career to starting with painting by numbers, so it’s clear that they can be a great jumping-off point.

Mixed media artist, educator and the creative behind Painted Paper Studio Jackie Bernardi helps artists – especially those who don’t always feel like artists – build creative confidence through playful exploration. She is a fervent advocate of painting by numbers, which she was introduced to when she was very young. ‘My first completed kit was of a horse and it was terrible, but I didn’t know that then. I thought it was beautiful. Years later, when I was a teenager, I found that painting and reworked it with the paints I had on hand, blending the harsh



PHOTOGRAPHS: HANNAH SHAW



lines until it didn't feel so stiff.' The practical value of these kits is still plentiful to her now. 'I'm always discovering something about blending, colour and painting outside the lines. I usually take the instructions as suggestions only, as this gives me the freedom to explore a particular interest, allowing me to break the rules in a safe environment.'

This rule-breaking, Jackie adds, is what keeps art and creation so exciting and makes painting by numbers perfect for new students. 'For many, the idea of figuring out what types of supplies they'll need – as well as the financial investment – is too much, and they end up not trying something that may have the potential to make them feel amazing from the inside out.'

Perhaps it is this promise of inner peace, quiet pride, even growth as an artist in all forms that makes painting by numbers so appealing. Yes, the idea that we can be good enough to gift a painting to a friend, or that we might fall so in love with the process that a new life direction is kick-started are compelling, but maybe it is the mind rest that resonates most of all. No matter what path you are on, being guided within the lines can support you to think outside of them, which might just bring a messy mind back to the way of stillness and clarity, and move your ideas in positive new directions.

Words: Alice Elgie

Alice is a wandering writer who shares words about her creative lifestyle through hold-in-the-hand letters and recorded reflections. Find her online at aliceelgie.com

INSPIRATIONAL CONTACTS

Elizabeth Raine is a UK-based professional portrait artist specialising in coloured pencil realism. From her garden art studio she creates pet, family and wildlife portraits for clients all over the world. Find her online at elizabethrainefineart.co.uk or on TikTok, Instagram and YouTube [@elizabethrainefineart](https://www.youtube.com/@elizabethrainefineart)

Peggy Melmoth and Emma Sprawson's Mindful Art Club Community Interest Company offers classes in Plymouth, UK as well as digital products to try at home, such as online art session recordings, guided mindfulness downloads and mindful colouring pages. Join them at mindfulartclub.co.uk or on socials [@mindfulartclub](https://www.instagram.com/mindfulartclub)

Hannah Shaw of Kiwi Paint by Numbers hopes to spread the joy of painting by encouraging everyone to believe that they can become an artist. Find her [@kiwpaintbynumbers](https://www.kiwpaintbynumbers.co.nz) or kiwpaintbynumbers.co.nz

Jackie Bernardi of Painted Paper Studio helps artists build creative confidence through playful exploration, layered techniques – and a whole lot of permission to experiment. Her website is paintedpaperstudio.com and she's also on YouTube [@PaintedPaperStudio](https://www.youtube.com/@PaintedPaperStudio)