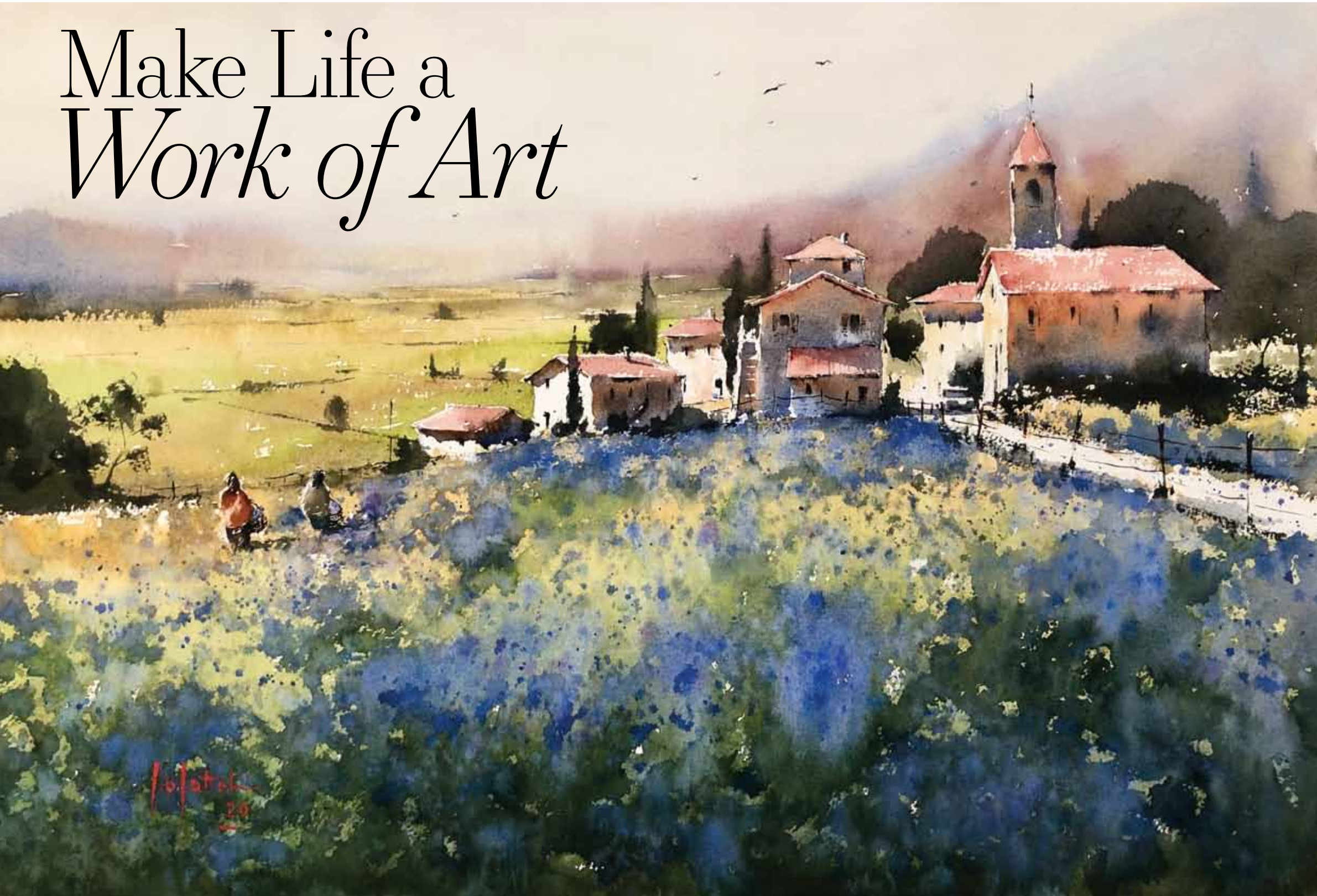


Make Life a *Work of Art*



For **Giordano Gattolin**, painting is just one part of the creative life he practices at his home and organic farm in Central Italy.

By Ani Kodjabasheva

“You can turn your life and yourself into a piece of art,” says Giordano Gattolin. “I think this is the key to being happy and joyful in all things.” The Italian artist has recently moved back to the rural property where he grew up and where he developed and ran an organic farm for 17 years with his partner, Tamara Duncker. The farm also functioned as a retreat center, and for years they hosted groups for seminars and courses about art, dancing and meditation. The couple also maintained an olive grove, vegetable garden and truffle grove.

Five years ago, when Gattolin and Duncker felt the need to recharge, they set out on a prolonged trip around Southern Europe in a camper van. This year, they’ve returned to their property in Central Italy and are working on reviving it as a center for alternative education with a greenhouse and orchard. After decades of work as an organic farmer, Gattolin says he continues to explore new agricultural methods and sees his way of life and his art as being part of the same creative path. “For me, it’s completely connected,” he says, “to paint and to be creative in other ways.” As an example, he explains that pruning olive trees requires concentration and craft developed through mindful repetition—not unlike working in watercolor. “You have to connect to the plant,” he says. “You need to be focused and attentive to know which branches to cut.”

Gattolin views all these activities as all being a part of a larger mindset in which he seeks to “create his own life.”

Cornflowers (watercolor on paper, 15x22)



TOP TO BOTTOM
Tuscan Farm House
(watercolor on
paper, 12¼x16)

Sunday Morning
(watercolor on
paper, 11x15)

WELCOMING CHANGE

Part of Gattolin’s ongoing practice is examining his emotional well-being as a means to welcome change. When he and his family made the decision to combat feelings of “burn-out” with a multi-year tour in a camper van, Gattolin started painting regularly and showing his work. The spectacular scenery he encountered across Spain and Portugal, and the artists he met along the way rekindled his engagement with watercolor. “Painting was always there. It was always a part of me,” Gattolin says. The tour, he explains, provided the space for that part of him to reemerge.

At one point in their travels, the family rented an apartment in Civitavecchia, a coastal town near Rome, where

the Port of Rome is located. There, Gattolin attended workshops with local watercolorists, including Massimiliano Iocco, Roberto Zangarelli and Igor Sava. Inspired by the location and by his dedicated colleagues, Gattolin found himself painting for many hours, every day.

THE POWER OF REPETITION

Although this openness to change has regularly led to personal and artistic growth for the artist, Gattolin has learned that repetition is also essential to strengthening one’s craft. Whether caring for olive trees or painting the human figure, doing something again and again is what often leads to breakthroughs.

With this in mind, Gattolin likes to revisit a subject, returning frequently to locations in and around his home in Umbria, a region in Central Italy that borders Tuscany. One of his favorite painting spots is the region around the hillside village of Castelluccio di Norcia, a place the artist has been visiting since his youth. He finds that climbing to secluded spots in the mountains there makes him feel as though he’s in the Himalayas. “I’m really close to this place,” he says. “I like to paint it and repaint it and then repaint it again.”

Gattolin has found that, over time, repetition leads to a more effortless flow, allowing him to integrate the lessons learned from mistakes into his current process. Figuring out how to work through a problem can take days when you’re first learning to paint, he notes. “But the more you train,” he says, “the more this becomes second nature. So, as you move your brush across the paper, you realize immediately when you need to move it another way.”

Thus, painting becomes an exercise in being present, responding to accidents as they occur and just letting things happen on the paper. By working in this manner, Gattolin believes a watercolorist can take full advantage of the medium’s inherent qualities—its “fluent and unpredictable nature.”



Yellow (watercolor on paper, 15x22)

WORKING EN PLEIN AIR



Gattolin takes advantage of his hand-built paintbox and streamlined plein air toolkit to paint on location.

When I designed my own equipment for outdoor painting, I knew I didn’t just want a tripod. I wanted a small mobile studio—a sort of all-in-one mobile painting box-studio—but lightweight. For the painting box, I discovered that a wine box, the kind used for gift packs of six bottles, was the perfect size. It just had to be modified and strengthened. Not having a lot of tools on hand in our temporary camper “home,” I kept it simple. The box holds only those tools I find absolutely necessary. With experience, painters quickly learn how to limit what they carry, knowing that extra weight makes the adventure of painting on location much more tiring and less pleasant. The rest of my setup includes the following supplies:

PAPER: I generally carry a few loose 15x11-inch sheets of Arches and/or Saunders Waterford 300-lb. rough paper. Alternatively, I might bring a 16x12-inch paper block.

BRUSHES: I use various sizes of both Escoda and Winsor & Newton squirrel mops, Escoda Pearl synthetics and sable rounds, and a few high-quality Chinese and Japanese calligraphy brushes of different sizes (I use the finest as a liner).

PAINT: I use a wide variety of watercolor brands, usually putting out about a couple dozen different tube colors onto my palette.

MISCELLANEOUS: I always pack a pencil, eraser, masking tape, blotting paper and sponge. My palette is made of iron, so it sticks to the magnets I inserted into my paint box. I use tin water containers for the same reason. All of the equipment can be locked onto my stand, which makes it easy to move, if necessary.

TIME TO RECHARGE

Gattolin has been careful to avoid the creative block that can often arise from an unvarying routine. In his youth, he moved from his parents' home to the nearest town of Assisi, where he first began his art practice. Later, he moved to London, where he stopped working as an artist for a time. He eventually returned to Italy to try his hand at farming. For Gattolin, such stops and starts in his art practice have tended to open possibilities. His advice is to welcome such breaks—and even purposely create them.

Typically, the artist works intensively on a project for a few days at a time and then puts his brushes aside for a while. “One week, I may do nothing but paint, and then I may stop for a week and do something else,” he says. “Other times, I may stop for a few months and then go back to painting again.”

Gattolin acknowledges that a long hiatus might be frightening, especially for new painters, but he maintains that breaks can be healthy and generative. “Even if you’re

not painting, you’re developing something within yourself. A pause can be grounding,” he says. “And when you do start painting again, you’ve often jumped forward and are able to bring new perspectives to your efforts.”

EMBRACING THE JOY

Gattolin cherishes the fact that he can paint only when he’s moved to do so. To him, it’s important that making art be distinct from doing work. For this reason, he decided to no longer work on commission; he needs a subject to speak to him from the start. The artist compares the experience of painting to that of romance. “It’s a beautiful, joyful thing; but if you force yourself into it, you lose the joy.” The practice of repetition leads to mastery, but that’s only possible if the drive to create is there.

Believing you can’t find joy in painting if you’re full of doubt, Gattolin encourages artists to suspend the critical thoughts. “I try to stop the judging,” he says. “I try to



A Dock in the Sky (watercolor on paper, 12¼x16)

Putting People in the Scene

When adding figures to a painting, I don’t always follow a standard protocol. Sometimes I plan ahead for figures, marking their positions in the preparatory watercolor drawing with a quick sketch. Other times, I don’t plan for them at all but decide to add them at the finish. Sometimes I use dense color; other times light, diluted washes. There are a few considerations and strategies, however, that I always find helpful when introducing figures to a scene:

1. Tell a story. I always begin by imagining the circumstances behind the scene: Who are these people? What are they doing? What story do they tell? Often the character’s storyline is explicit; other times, the mere addition of a few material elements—chimney smoke or an abandoned bicycle, for example—are enough to suggest a human presence and create the necessary vitality in the piece.

2. Determine the level of attention. Choosing where to insert a figure in the composition depends on several factors. If the figure is central to the story, I’ll give it more importance with greater attention to the details and contrast, and with more expression in terms of positioning. If the figure is a secondary element, however, I take care not to use excessive detail.

3. Use your intuition. As a caveat to the above remarks, keep in mind that introducing figures into a painting also involves sensitivity and intuition, which for me take precedence over compositional matters. Following one’s intuition is always more exciting than respect for the rules. I think of it this way: If the rules represent what we *know* to work; intuition represents the *unknown*—the possibilities still waiting to be discovered.

4. Remember the light. Often my figures are very dark, simple silhouettes created with wet-into-wet color blends. Introduced at the end of the painting process, without any white space having been left for them, I hint at a few points of light by using small touches of dense white gouache straight from the tube.



As you can see in **Sketch Figures** (watercolor on paper, 11x15), it doesn’t take an abundance of detail to suggest a figure. The presence of people can inject movement and vitality into your composition.



If I’ve determined the figure’s position in advance, as in **Alley in Bomarzo** (watercolor on paper, 15x11), I’ll typically use the brush to cut around the figure, painting the negative shapes in the first washes and taking care to leave highlights on the head and shoulders. I’ll then leave the figure to paint later. If I’m introducing a figure that wasn’t previously planned—without having left any white space for it—I’ll add them as dark, simple silhouettes, which I paint using wet-into-wet color blends. To hint at some points of light, I’ll use small touches of dense white gouache straight from the tube.

“My watercolors connect me to the outside world, to other people.”



TOP LEFT
Ponte di Santa Croce
(watercolor on paper, 11x15)

BOTTOM LEFT
Castelluccio
(watercolor on paper, 15x22)

ABOVE
Piano Grande
(watercolor on paper, 15x22)

accept that results will vary. Sometimes the results are fine; sometimes beautiful. Other times, I may not like the work and decide it's not good enough, and I can let it go."

Gattolin has met painters who seem never to be satisfied with their art. While this is natural, he recommends that artists embrace even the imperfect work, because it, too, tells a story and teaches a painter how to move forward.

TWO KINDS OF PAINTING

Over time, Gattolin has divided his art-making into two very different types: the watercolors, which he exhibits publicly, and more experimental work, which he does purely for himself. During the time he was developing his farm and retreat center, he practiced art primarily as a form of self-exploration. "I discovered that if you paint feelings, emotions or just visions, then what you put on the canvas is also a way of working on yourself," he says. "You can know yourself better when doing this kind of artwork. It's difficult work, and it took time before I had the courage to share it—and all those deep feelings—with other people."

In his more personal work, Gattolin uses mixed media, including oil and acrylic. He hopes to express deeper truths through abstraction and conceptual compositions that use objects as symbols. Letting go of technical mastery and the conventions of realism invites a different artistic language.

Gattolin hasn't focused on this kind of work lately, but he would return to it if he found himself facing some personal challenge. A single painting can affect him for months. "It will keep on telling me a lot of things about myself," he says. "In this way, it offers a path to growth."

By comparison, the artist describes his watercolor practice as much less demanding, but then he modifies his statement to say that watercolor is demanding in different ways—the challenges having to do mainly with technique and not with inner conflict. "I do this painting for pleasure," he says. "When I feel that I'd like to paint, I go and start a watercolor."

If his abstract paintings express a more private, interior world, the artist's watercolors convey impressions to which others can easily relate. "My watercolors connect me to the outside world, to other people," he says.



Autumn in Spello (watercolor on paper, 15x22)

A SENSE OF PLACE

Gattolin's landscape paintings are imbued with a sense of place so immersive that even someone who has never been to the site will feel at home in the scene. The compositions feature such sights as the sun-baked architecture of old Italian towns, brightly painted farmhouses amidst fields of dry grass and fishing boats afloat in a shimmering sea. In an otherwise free-flowing approach, the artist uses a few precise details—the sharp lines of a farm building and a herd of cows in *Piano Grande* (page 67), or the bell tower framed against the quiet sky in *Autumn in Spello* (above)—to ground the viewer. The result are paintings that communicate clearly with eye-catching confidence.

Gattolin creates his watercolors with minimal sketching, which he does very freely. “The first sketch is about having fun and letting things happen,” he says. When preparing for a painting, he says he likes to remain free “to make a mess and play with color.” In the actual artwork, which he usually completes in the studio, the artist increases the amount of control. He typically applies two layers of wash, with sharper detailing added as a third layer. His palette features a fairly limited range of colors as a base, but he usually adds extra colors to pick out the details.

Though he'll always remain open to adventure and new directions, the artist keeps coming back to the landscapes of Umbria, where he tends to his art with the same care and persistence he gives to his groves of olive trees. **WA**

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Meet the Artist



Giordano Gattolin was born in Milan, Italy, into a family of artists. When he was 10, his family moved to Assisi, in Umbria, where he grew up amidst woods, hills and olive groves. Although he has worked in oil, acrylic, ceramics and other media, his primary focus has been and remains watercolor. His award-winning watercolors have been

widely exhibited across Italy as well as at venues in China, Japan, Indonesia, Argentina and Mexico, among other countries. To learn more about the artist and his workshop offerings, visit giordanogattolin.org.