

“ Adding narrative elements is a personal touch that greatly sets paintings apart from each other, even if they feature the same subject ”

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# FIND YOUR STYLE

An original style can make up for practically any flaw in your painting and will more often than not determine the shape of your career and commercial success as an artist. Marta Dahlig shares her experience and knowledge to help you find your style.

**A**n original and consistent 'signature' style is usually something that every artist has to develop at their own pace. It's achieved via a combination of many factors, such as technique, colour themes, subject choice and symbolism, and is slowly developed over months or even years. There are no instant solutions or shortcuts to immediately achieving your own style, but there are, however, a few factors that, once analysed and put

into consideration, might help you focus on your artistic aims.

So, how do you make yourself recognisable? The advice here is obviously only a guideline, as a signature style is a personal thing, but I will, however, outline the elements that distinguish one artwork from another and point out things you can consider and analyse about your own art to make yourself more recognisable and broaden your artistic horizons.

To help you discover your style, first do lots of quick sketches, making note of what part of a character you concentrate on drawing first.

*Artist*  
**PROFILE**  
**Marta Dahlig**  
COUNTRY: Poland



Born in 1985, Marta Dahlig is a young and talented artist who has been working with Photoshop and Painter for years.  
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## 1 SKETCHING AND SPEED PAINTING

The role of speed painting in achieving an original style should never be overestimated. It might sound too simple to actually work, but trust me, doing lots of sketches will not only improve your workflow in terms of speed, but will also help you crystallise the focal points of your paintings. Sketch in different environments: try subways, parks and so on. Analyse what you concentrate on painting first (character's body, face, clothing) and what your first decisions are (colours, shapes or general composition). This will help you understand yourself better; what was once a sub-conscious trait will become a tool that you knowingly use.



Analyse whether you like your paintings to have a polished look or whether you prefer a looser finish.

## 2 POLISHING

This is one of the key elements of your technique and basically means asking yourself a question: do you want a piece polished, with brushstrokes barely visible, (and therefore will you spend a lot of time blending colours, which is most suitable for photorealism), or are you aiming for a loose, painterly feel?



# Workshops



## 3 SUBJECT CHOICE

Consider what it is that you prefer to paint. Is it landscapes or characters? Do you prefer narrative paintings, emotional portraits, dynamic compositions or character designs? Try to be as precise as possible, considering not just the general subject but also the detail. For example, for me it would be portraits of women dressed in gowns, enriched by narrative elements. Of course, subject choice is not enough to define your style, as even the same topics portrayed by different artists can look very different.



## 4 LIGHTING

The way you use lighting is a great way to distinguish your art. Firstly, decide whether you want to use ambient or punctual lighting (and if so, where should it be placed). Next you need to decide on the type of light (and thus the colour theme) and the intensity of it. Usually the bolder the light source, the more distinctive and interesting your work will look.

## 5 BRUSHES

Do you prefer to paint with natural media simulated brushes, and therefore enhance your paintings in 'traditional' looking textures, or do you prefer to work with seamless digital brushes? You can choose between many digital techniques, varying from relying solely on airbrushes (and achieving a very soft look), to using texture-heavy custom brushes for hyper realism.



## 6 COMPOSITION

This step involves dozens of decisions. Firstly, decide whether you want to paint a background and, if so, how detailed it should

Left: Consider placing your character to one side of the picture and cropping in tightly, so that parts of his or her body are cut out of the frame.

be. Should it play the sole role of filling the space behind the character, letting the person be the most highlighted element, or should it be directly integrated with the main object? You should also decide on the character placement - try to place the character to one side of the painting, instead of the clichéd middle position. Also vary the way you crop the whole painting; for example, when doing bust portraits try cutting off the very top of the character's head for a more dynamic and modern look.

## 7 CHARACTER FEATURES

If you want to be recognised by the way you paint your characters, remember, it's rarely enough just to draw a pretty face! You should add something more to spice things up. Try to change the anatomy of your painted faces a bit - modify the length of the nose, shape of the skull or size of the ears. Don't limit yourself to the standard concepts of beauty.



Think beyond the clichéd ideas of beauty. It's much more fun to paint a female figure with a bit of character rather than reproduce Barbie dolls.



Think about the kind of brushes you like to use - ones that create traditional textures or ones that create a more seamless digital look. This will go a long way to determining your final style.

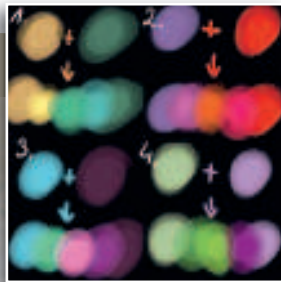




## 8 FACIAL EXPRESSIONS

Facial expressions aren't as easy to depict as you might think; they require some time to be mastered, but it's definitely worth the time spent. Adding bold emotions to your characters will greatly underline the overall mood of your paintings. Avoid using neutral looks unless absolutely necessary – blank faces and empty stares can drag any artwork down! Also, try to experiment with the focal point of your character – if you want them to look provocative, try to make them maintain eye contact with the audience. However, if you aim for more poetic depictions, eye contact should be avoided.

“Avoid using neutral looks – blank faces and empty stares can drag any artwork down”

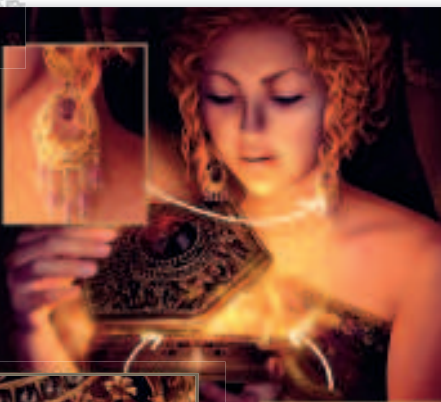


## 11 COLOUR COMBINATIONS

If you feel you're repeating yourself and your paintings are too much alike, do some exercises on colour combinations. Pick two contrasting, unmatching shades and add two or three other colours between them to achieve an attractive colour theme. If possible, do a full piece using those colours.

## 9 COLOUR THEMES

Decide upon the colour palettes: do you prefer to work with bold, saturated colours, or would you rather use calm, greyish shades? Moreover, decide whether to use a multitude of colours within a painting or make it monochromatic, basing it mainly around one shade. Finally, decide whether to use contrasting or complementary colours.



Enrich objects with texture or add adorning elements.

## 10 DETAILING

When it comes to realism, it's good to have a high level of detail. You can do this in two ways: by enriching existing objects in additional textures or by adding a lot of adorning elements. Decide whether you want to paint every detail meticulously or would rather hint at the details. While hinting will make your work seem much more painterly, it might result in blurry effects. However, painting every little detail with extra sharpness might result in the artwork looking artificial and copy pasted.



## 12 HISTORICAL REFERENCE

Using historical elements is a wonderful way to differentiate yourself and enhance your style. One way is to analyse the styles of old masters and try to stylise your paintings to resemble particular historical trends. This is done by following techniques, subject matters and composition. Secondly, you can use characteristic styles from particular eras, such as technique, common elements (for example, Art Nouveau borders) and subjects, and incorporate them into your paintings, creating an interesting contrast. ➔

# Workshops



## 13 PRACTISE INTERPRETING

Whenever possible, pick a theme, poem or song you like and draw an interpretation of it. This little exercise will greatly develop your artistic sensitivity and expand your horizons, by forcing you to quickly create associations with different subjects. After a few times doing this, you'll be able to understand the way you interpret themes, as well as depict a broader range of ideas.

“Using one very well-known theme requires the use of a lot of reference material to keep your work credible”



## 14 CULTURAL REFERENCE

Using cultural references is as wonderful as it is tricky. You can stylise your pieces fully or use only certain elements. You can also implement a mix of contrasting cultures in one painting, which is quite interesting if done correctly. If you want a stylised look, do a lot of research first; using one very well-known theme, such as ancient China, requires the use of a lot of reference material to keep your work credible.



## 15 NARRATIVE ELEMENTS AND SYMBOLISM

Adding narrative elements is a personal touch that greatly sets paintings apart from each other, even if they feature the same subject. There are plenty of ways to enrich the narration of a painting. You can create a contrast by adding some objects that don't 'fit' the rest of the image, depict a whole scene with a detailed background and foreground, or you can add some symbols into the picture to create allegories. If you decide on the last option, be sure to do some reading first in order to make your symbolism universal and understandable without much explanation.

## MARTA'S TOP TIP

### 16 STAY NATURAL

The whole question of finding a suitable style comes down to one simple task: doing what you personally like the most. It doesn't matter whether you love classical American comic art, Chibi manga or photorealism - do what is most fun for you, as every choice is good. Never force a style on yourself just because it turned out to be

commercially successful. There are no golden solutions or patterns to follow. Development needs years of devotion and, to truly improve, you should always put your whole heart into your work. In the long run you'll benefit much more if you stay true to yourself, even if it means consciously giving up on short-term gains. ●

