

# Artist's Manual



a 'how-to' guide for  
anyone working with  
acrylic paints

free sample pages for  
**PART ONE**

Everything you need to know  
when starting out

a practical and easy-to-understand guide by

**C h a r l o t t e   G i b l i n**

Hello!

This has been compiled to help any artists who are just starting to learn how to paint with acrylics or are in early stages of their creative career. These tips, techniques, and simple explanations answer the 'basic questions' of things I wanted (and needed) to know when I was starting out, and I've added in subjects that my students have asked me over the years.

I've worked 'on both sides of the fence' as a professional exhibiting artist and a gallery director as well as an art tutor and creative mentor. I've had a lot of experience dealing with the expectations of galleries as well as being hands-on with my own paintings and those of my students.

There is an overwhelming mass of information 'out there' and I've based this manual on my experience of what's important to know – without fuss or frills – and I've tried to explain *why* at every stage, so you can weigh up the options and make up your own mind.

**This pack of information is a useful written accompaniment to my free YouTube videos about painting techniques.** [Search for Charlotte Giblin Art on YouTube](#) for more.

In those video tutorials, I explain in clear detail what I'm doing – and why – and talk about the materials I'm using; demonstrate how to best hold a brush; why you get certain results with different techniques; the difference between paint brands etc. You may find that you want to print this reference manual off and watch the tutorials again, making your own notes alongside mine until you become confident enough to paint freely.

Bear in mind, **if you do print this off, the colours may be altered.** In sections where it's necessary to understand the specific colours I'm using, I would recommend looking at the document on a screen.

Happy painting!  
From Charlotte



## Artist's Manual

### PART ONE

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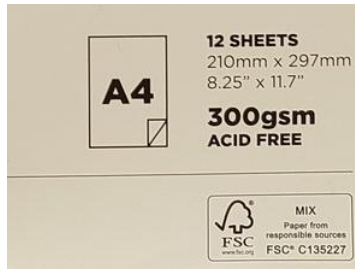
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## **Before you start painting: choosing your surface**

### **Painting on Paper**

The **painting surface** you use can have a huge impact on the way your work looks.

If you're using paper to paint on, you need to use one with at least a 300gsm weight. You'll always see the number on the front of pads of paper – "gsm" is grams per square metre – and the higher the number, the thicker the paper. Printer paper, for example, is usually 80gsm.



The description "acid free" means that the paper won't turn yellow over time. Most papers these days are acid free, but make sure it says so!

As acrylic is water-based and heavy, if you use thin paper then it will warp with the moisture. If you use a *lot* of water in your painting, even a thick/heavy paper will warp.

Watercolour artists avoid this by 'stretching' their paper – you can Google it if you want to learn the process – but on the whole it's not necessary for acrylic painting. I don't recommend much painting on paper because of the potential warping issue; however, I did an entire series of over one hundred pictures (my *Big Skies* illustrations in acrylic) on 300gsm A3 paper to save money and storage space... and they all worked well with minimal warping!

You can also get special pads of paper for acrylic/oil painting which have a plasticky coating that's supposed to stop any warping, and it's a great way to practise your art techniques without spending a lot of money on canvas. Canvas boards are also an option (thin canvas over cardboard) but be careful about warping: it's best to frame them afterwards to be sure you've flattened out any warp.

### **Painting on Canvas**

**Different types....** And demystifying the label! I've attached a regular off-the-shelf canvas label here to look at the list of bullet-points on it.



- Firstly, you have the product's overall dimensions and the description "**stretched**" which means that it has been pulled tight around a wooden frame, making the canvas surface flat (no ripples). It also means the canvas is ready to hang on the wall afterwards. Other versions

of canvas are loose – on a roll – which is good for certain types of painting but then you need to get someone to ‘stretch’ it over a wooden frame afterwards for display. The easiest thing is to buy off-the-shelf canvas already stretched.

- **“Staple free edge.”** This means that the canvas has been pulled all the way round the frame and stapled on the back, so the sides don’t have any staples visible.

This one is  $\frac{3}{4}$ ” thick (approx. 25mm) meaning the wood used for the frame is that thick at the sides. Cheaper canvases tend to be this depth, but you can also get ones which are approx. 1  $\frac{3}{4}$ ” (38mm). This affects the amount of canvas you can see at the sides and how far they stick out from the wall. I prefer the ones with wider sides as the wood tends to be sturdier (well, it’s thicker!) but lots of people use the thinner ones as they are cheaper – and can be put in frame afterwards (if you want) with more ease.
- Canvas, like paper, also comes in **different weights**: this one is 8oz, but I’ve bought canvases which are 12oz or 16oz and are much thicker and stronger.

The better quality/thicker ones are sometimes called ‘heavy duty’ or ‘museum grade’ and if the thinner ones are given a name, it might be ‘lightweight’ or ‘studio’... although you can usually tell by the price which ones are made with better quality/thicker material! There are also variations in canvas material from cotton to poly-cotton to linen... although most off-the-shelf ones are going to be cotton (as this one is). You can also get different surface textures, although most are ‘universal’ with a slight weave detectable. I’ve found that if the canvas is particularly textured *or* very smooth it will be advertised, so if there isn’t a description on the label then it will be of a standard, medium texture.

You can exploit the canvas weave with your brush – I often use the little lumps and bumps to create a dry ‘sketched’ effect as the paint catches on the raised surface – and as more paint builds up you get more and more tiny, raised areas of paint which make a very interesting surface to work on!

Or you can buy canvas which has a minimal weave and is much smoother, minimising the textural impact. If you’re using thin paint or layers of washes, a smooth canvas is better, but if you’re using thick paint and lots of layers it doesn’t matter because a lot of the canvas texture will get covered up anyway.
- **“Kiln dried stretcher bars.”** This refers to the wooden pieces that make up the frame which the canvas is stapled to. If they have been “kiln dried” the suggestion is that they have been slowly dried (in a kiln) to remove any moisture and harden them which should – in theory – stop them from warping over time.

My advice with canvases would be that if you’re working on small to medium sized ones then the quality doesn’t matter so much when you’re starting out. However, when you start painting larger pieces (3ft/1m length or longer) then try to find canvas which is better quality – and has thicker stretcher bars – because I’ve had terrible trouble with cheap, large canvases warping. Once a canvas’ stretcher bars have warped then there’s not much you can do about it other than remove the canvas and stretch it on another (new) frame.
- **“Sized with acrylic gesso.”** Almost all ready-made stretched canvases you buy off-the-shelf will be painted with gesso (pronounced with a ‘soft g’ sound like “jelly” as opposed to a ‘hard g’ like “guess”) which is a primer paint that is a bit chalky, thick, opaque, smooth and a great background for painting on. It is used chiefly to cover the natural canvas and to prevent your paint absorbing into the weave: essentially, the canvas has been given a ‘waterproof’ layer on one side.

When it says “sized” on the label, to be honest, the only thing I can think is that it means the canvas has been measured after adding the gesso, which may have caused the canvas to

shrink a bit. However, it's a bit bizarre as there would only be tiny changes in the canvas dimensions, so I'm not sure why they use the word. Probably just to make it sound fancier than it is!

Some artists paint a layer of gesso over the top of the canvas before they start. I don't because I use lots of layers of paint. However, if you add your own layers of gesso onto a canvas you can create a pattern with brush marks or a thicker textural surface to start from.

Working on mixed-fibre board or plywood – or any other porous surface – be careful to make sure the surface *is* primed (painted with gesso), so it won't absorb the colours of your paint. If you're using flimsy materials or thin wood, I would recommend that you prime the back as well as the front. This prevents moisture from entering/affecting one side of the board more than the other, which could lead to warping.



- **“Acid free priming.”** They've doubled-up here with their bullet-points! The priming refers to the layer of gesso and the “acid free” is to reassure you that they've used a good quality primer which won't 'yellow' over time.

**The 'bag of sticks'** (sometimes wooden, sometimes plastic) on the back of a ready-made canvas. Ever wondered what they are for?!

You'll notice there are slots in the corners of your canvas frame. These 'sticks' (wooden

spacers) are designed to be hammered/pushed into the slots at right angles to each other which – in theory – pushes the wooden frame apart a tiny bit. In turn, as the frame is pushed apart at the corners, the canvas tightens across the top, so you have a really taut surface for painting on.

The problem is that some of the spacers have really sharp points, so if you push them too far into the frame slots, they can actually pierce or stretch the canvas at the side! Or the slot is drilled too wide, and the spacers fall out, or the slot is too tight, and they don't fit.



Basically, on a small - medium canvas you simply don't need them: they are a waste of wood and plastic. You only need to use them if you have a larger canvas and the material has become noticeably slack in transit/storage.

I have used them to positive effect on higher quality canvases which have slots drilled correctly and spacers created to fit the slots snugly.

When you get your canvas out of the plastic, hold it by the wooden frame and tap the top surface – or flick it with your fingernail – like a drum. If it sounds taut and creates a 'tight' sound, then you have a good, stretched canvas and need do nothing else. If the canvas doesn't 'tap' well then you may need to use the spacers to tighten the canvas surface.