

The Nature of **Sketching**



FOR **JUNKO ONO ROTHWELL**, FIELD SKETCHING IS NOT ONLY A WAY TO EXPERIENCE AND RECORD WHAT INSPIRES HER, BUT A METHOD FOR CREATING LASTING SENSORY MEMORIES.

Amy Leibrock



ABOVE
**At the Market in
Guatemala** (20x26)

OPPOSITE
**Mt. Sainte-Victoire,
France** (13x18)

Junko Ono Rothwell felt the joy of sketching from life at a young age.

In elementary school in her native Japan, her class had plein-air days where they would go to a park or beach and paint what they saw with watercolors. When she was in junior high school, Rothwell's art teacher encouraged her to fill a sketchbook over the summer. "Draw anything you want," he told her.

She spent that summer covering pages with sketches of her family, landscapes and even insects. She wasn't sure if her teacher would approve of them—some were almost scribbles—but he was, of course, delighted. Some of his comments about her sketches stay with her to this day. Like, "What a beautiful pattern" for her sketch of the wing of a cicada. And "Good movement you caught" for a quick sketch of people.

"He opened my eyes to the beauty of nature around me and encouraged me again to continue it," says the artist. "Since then, I have kept a sketchbook with me all the time."

Today, Rothwell is an accomplished pastel and oil painter of still life, landscapes and figures, but sketches and scribbles are still an important part of her art practice. Her sketches are looser and more abstract than her other work, and the media she uses varies depending on the subject matter or situation. To capture the colors of hills filled with wildflowers, such as in *Mt. Sainte-Victoire, France* (opposite), she chooses pastel. If her time is short or the weather looks threatening, she will capture quick impressions with watercolor instead.

For Rothwell, sketches start as a way to experience and record what inspires her. Making art in the moment helps her create lasting sensory memories. Sometimes



“THERE IS NO BETTER WAY TO LEARN TO PAINT LANDSCAPES THAN FROM NATURE.

—JUNKO ONO ROTHWELL

a scene painted quickly en plein air will serve as a study for a larger painting that she'll finish in the studio, along with reference photos. In other cases, she will spend more time on the sketch itself, building up color with pastel. Sometimes she ends up selling those works.

“I think when you see the scene in front of you and fall in love with it, you create a good painting,” says Rothwell. “When I’m sketching, I don’t think about sales, I just try to capture what I see. After I finish, I put it out of my sight for a while. Then when I see it again, I know whether it’s good enough to sell or not.”

Sketching Everywhere

Rothwell had her first extensive plein air experiences overseas as a college student when she traveled to Central and South America. “To see a different world from Japan

was so interesting. I wanted to record what I saw and felt in my sketchbooks,” says the artist. “When I look at those sketches now, I vividly remember not only the place but the atmosphere—how I felt there—the air and the smells.” Decades later, she visited Guatemala again, and *At the Market in Guatemala* (previous page), is one of the finished paintings that came from sketches from that trip.

She has enjoyed sketching landscapes and people wherever she goes ever since. Whether close to home or further afield, the artist brings sketching materials along with her wherever she roams. Italy and Portugal are two of her favorite destinations to sketch and paint. Aside from the breathtaking scenery, she says the people are kind, yet they leave her to focus on her work.

When Rothwell travels to one place for several days, she sets out on the first day—small sketchbook in hand—to

ABOVE
Lerici, Italy
(13x16)

RIGHT
Orvieto, Italy
(18x13)



scout promising sketching and painting locations. She makes several quick sketches to help decide which locations she wants to return to with her backpack of pastel materials in the coming days. Good views and enough space to set up an easel for drawing and painting are her main criteria.

Different Methods

Rothwell has two methods of pastel sketching and painting depending on what kind of paper she uses. “When I see the scene I want to sketch, I’m not thinking which paper is good for it,” she says. “Sometimes I just want to try a new paper or new color. I usually bring several kinds of paper just in case.”

She likes using Art Spectrum or PastelMat for cityscapes. With those papers, she starts with a charcoal sketch and then adds layers of pastel. “I like to build colors of the walls of old buildings using those papers,” she says. (See *Civita di Bagnoregio, Italy*, below.)

If she uses UArt paper, sometimes she applies an underpainting on several different colors of paper beforehand so she has choices when she’s out painting. (See pastel paper material UArt image at left.) “I sometimes use complementary colors for the background and the main color I’m using in the painting. For example, when I’m painting green trees, I may use a reddish background wash. The red color peeks out between the greens. If it’s the same value, it works well,” she says.



If she doesn’t have a prepared surface, she starts with an underpainting. Her preferred method is to wet pastel with



ABOVE
Old Port of
Marseille, France
(18x13)

OPPOSITE
Civita di
Bagnoregio, Italy
(11x15)

turpentine, but since she can’t bring turpentine on an airplane, she purchases rubbing alcohol at local stores when traveling abroad.

“I like this method for painting seascapes and skies, because I can use brushstrokes for the movement of water or clouds,” says the artist.

Rothwell first sketches the basic composition with charcoal. Next, she lays down the basic colors. Then, she applies the turpentine or alcohol to the surface as a wash using a 2-inch brush.

Then she establishes the masses, color, shadow and light, using brushstrokes to suggest the basic movement of the composition. After the surface is dry, she adds more colors.

Rothwell paints all over the paper rather than working on one section at a time. “I want to capture the light and shadow, so I paint the darkest and lightest areas first. The light changes constantly and fast, so I stay with the beginning light,” she says.

Full Circle

Rothwell’s skill and passion for pastel show how far she has come from her formative years studying art in Japan. As a student at Okayama University, she studied traditional, academic methods. Instructors emphasized the

ON-SITE SKETCHING SUPPLIES

“It’s easy to haul all kinds of materials along when you’re traveling in a car,” says Rothwell, “but for overseas travel I need to think more carefully about what I really need.” When traveling further afield, the artist carries a small backpack full of art supplies that includes:

- 12x16 pastel and glassine papers in a paper holder
- 2-inch brush for underpainting
- portable easel
- pastel pencils
- pastel sticks (Rembrandt, Schminicke, Sennelier and Unison, Nupastels and Richeson square pastels)
- charcoal
- tissue or a few paper towels

To keep things clean, pastels and the paper holder can be kept in separate plastic bags.



virtues of drawing correctly and painting neatly. Back then, pastels were not popular in her home country, and so she didn't start painting with them until she came to the U.S., where she learned more about pastelists like Edgar Degas, Mary Cassatt and William Merritt Chase. She was especially drawn to Robert Blum, one of the first American artists to paint images of Japan. "When I saw his pastels at an exhibition in Smithsonian about 20 years ago, I just fell in love with his work," she says.

Today, pastels are more popular in Japan, and she's involved with the community there, serving as a board member of the Modern Pastel Society of Japan.

Rothwell says making art outdoors, from life helps her continue to learn new things; more than painting in her studio ever could.

"When I paint in my studio, even when I use my preliminary sketches and reference photos, I feel that I lose the freshness of nature," she says. "Photographs don't show things the way the human eye sees them. The colors and

perspective are different. They don't focus on one spot the way the eye does. When you see a photo, it makes you feel as if the landscape is flat and uniform."

This is why she works outside as much as possible. She likes the challenge of having to act quickly to capture a scene as the light changes. "There is no better way to learn to paint landscapes than from nature. I can observe depth, proportions and object relations much better than from a photograph. I can study first-hand how the light and shadow changes. There's only limited time, so I need to push myself, think and decide about the composition and color quickly," she says.

Even though Rothwell has painted around the world, it's clear that she's still rooted to those early art experiences in Japan that connected her to nature. "When I stand in the field, I can hear birds and smell the air. I feel I become a part of nature. It's such a nice feeling." *PJ*

Amy Leibrock is a Cincinnati-based writer and content manager.

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE
View at Okikamuro, Japan (13x17)

Farm at Greystones, Ireland (13x17)

Boats in Japan (13x17)



Junko Ono Rothwell (junkoonorothwell.com) is a Master Pastelist of the Pastel Society of America; a member of excellence of the Atlanta Artists Club and the Southeastern Pastel Society; a Fellow of the American Artist Professional League; and a member of the Pastel Society of Japan. Her paintings have received many awards, and her work has appeared in several books, magazines and exhibitions around the world. She also illustrated a children's book in Japanese: *M. McLaughlin, Minna no koe ga kikoeru* (Bungeisha, 2002).