Lesson 3—Types of Journals

We’ve talked about what kind of journal you prefer (or think you might!), how you can use it, and what interests you most...now we’ll dig into some nitty-gritty exploring! Let’s take a peek at some different types of journals you might consider keeping or subjects you might want to delve into.

- Combination/integrated, or dedicated to a single subject?
- One journal or several? (Toned paper, watercolor, writing paper, pocket or travel journal to supplement your “main” one?)
- Recipes, family treasures, memories
- Study and planning
- Nature Study
- Travel journals
- Growth of a garden, pet, skill, child
- Fantasy journal

Combination/integrated, or dedicated to a subject or theme?

If you prefer to keep only one journal at a time, do you want to make it an integrated journal or choose a theme? Can you maintain an interest in a single subject long enough to finish that book? I know a lot of artists who DO manage to fill a whole journal (or several!) while on a trip–Liz Steel does! Roz Stendahl kept a journal dedicated to daily sketches of her beloved dog, Dot; Krista Wells journals AS a dog (Ruca Cao, a Portuguese pup who “co-authored” the fun, poignant Dog-eared Journals, available here.) A med-school journal would be one possibility, a family history, or a journal tracking the growth and antics of your children.
One journal or several?

Beyond the question of an integrated journal or one dedicated to a theme, do you want to work in one journal at a time or several? This could be according to theme, but also size, quality (some folks like to keep a scribble-journal for quick sketches, testing or exploring tools or color mixtures), type of paper (toned paper, watercolor, writing paper?), pocket or travel journal to supplement your regular one?

I made myself a journal with all toned paper years ago and find I have yet to use a single page of it! Turns out I prefer having a few toned pages tucked into my main journal or, as mentioned earlier, I color the pages myself with ink, acrylic or watercolor, as needed.

Don’t discount toned paper, though, it is FUN. You can work with a dark and a light pen, pencil or pain and make your sketches almost 3-D. Do a little, as I did at left, or a lot, it’s very versatile. You can keep building light and dark until it’s almost like sculpting!

Try it! (And then of course make notes on what you liked or didn’t like, right in your journal.)
TONED PAPER

You may get hooked on the effect of toned paper—especially if that pristine white bothers you! You can either get journals made with toned paper (Strathmore, Cachet, Fabriano and others make them, as do some handmade bookbinders), you can bind your own, or you can color a few existing pages. It’s fun!

If you’re using a commercial colored paper, you may want to use a black and a white drawing tool—Uniball Signo, GellyRoll and white Sharpie (water based) pens work well, or a white Prismacolor pencil. Using those two together suggests almost a 3D effect.

You can also use a variety of colors on toned or dark paper—lots of bang for the buck!

Yes, this IS in my journal...fun to do, and challenging, with colored pencils.
Color Your Own

You have a lot more freedom and choice if you color your own pages. Acrylic paints come in a wide array of colors, just like watercolors do. I do use either liquid acrylic paint or acrylic ink rather than watercolor for the most part, so the color won’t lift.

These kids were sketched on a acrylic paint-tinted page and drawn with an inexpensive ballpoint I borrowed in my doctor’s office.

(And by the way this IS one of the best uses of your journal, to pass the time while waiting!)

Thin your ink or acrylic to the desired color and value and paint it on your page smoothly, or allow some variety for texture and interest. Now, prop your journal open carefully and let it dry very thoroughly before closing the book or your pages may stick together. Ink is less tacky than paint, and liquid acrylics are less tacky than tubes, so if you opt for tube paints, thin them well with water and make SURE they’re good and dry.

Then–sketch away, as simple or complex an image as you like. Let the color or texture inspire you or suggest a subject, or plan ahead and tint the paper a color that will complement an image you’ve already planned. Match, complement, contrast—it’s up to you.

And of course you can always tint over images if you like, as I did above (and paint around others), then work in a little more light and dark. I loved this page from a concert by Acoustic Eidolon.

**TIP:** Watercolor will also work to pre-tint your paper, but if you’re using a fountain pen to work over it you may find your lines spread a bit, getting thicker than you’d planned.
I used an acrylic ink to cover this page in my journal, not trying for a smooth wash but something with a little texture.

Then I grabbed a white Prismacolor colored pencil and began to draw the light-struck parts of my old iron pot.

A black colored pencil worked in the shadowed area and the rusty color of the ink background acts as the midtone.

Finally, I refined the shapes, added a little texture for the pot to sit on, and added white and black letters for my bird seed page. I even sketched in some spilled seed! It’s a fun and evocative page for me, because this pot is in constant use for the feathered flock outside my shed.

**Note:** Of course you can use any color, any value, any strength, from transparent to opaque, for your background! Any medium to work *on* it, too—ballpoint, pencil, full-color colored pencils. Make yourself graphite guidelines or not—it’s up to you!
My main problem with working in several journals is that I can’t always quickly find the one I absolutely must have THIS MINUTE! I went to an integrated, anything-goes journal years ago, mostly for that reason. (And oddly, at present, I’m back to my main artist’s journal plus two mostly-writing ones, the lovely, smooth Epsilon journals from Stillman & Birn—and no, I don’t work for them. I just like their journals a lot). One of these is more of a personal diary, working through problems I really don’t plan to share with the world, and the other is a spiritual journey—which of course is even more personal.

You can try it both ways—a single integrated journal, and a variety according to size, purpose, theme, etc.—and see which suits you best.

Recipes, family treasures, memories?

Of course, you don’t have to decide on a single-themed journal; any of these ideas can be included in your regular journal. I’ve done enough sketches of childhood toys and family keepsakes I almost could have filled a book with them—if I’d done them all at once instead of spaced over several years.

I seldom wear my grandmother’s mother-of-pearl ring, but I was delighted to sketch it in my journal.

Check out our little video demonstration at the link, here—I chose a childhood toy, with ink and watercolor, two of my favorite mediums for journal work!
**Exercise:**

Do you still have a favorite toy, your husband’s or wife’s bronzed baby shoe, your mom’s favorite china teacup, grandpa’s magnifying glass, dad’s pocketknife? Your child’s first binky? Your class ring?

Draw them, and write about what they are, what they mean, and why you’re sketching them.

You may want to dedicate a single journal to favorite recipes—especially if your family has a long tradition of great cooks. Write your very own illustrated, step-by-step cookbook...you could even have it printed by a company like Blurb and share with the family.

Lots of these illustrations have also appeared in our blog, **Starving Artists in the Kitchen**, which I write with my husband Joseph!

**Exercise:**

Give it a try—if you cook, sketch out your dish, and write the recipe right beside it.

Or do a step by step, with words or just sketches!
Maybe you’re going back to school, planning to study biology or dance, psychology or history—or art!

Your journal is a perfect place to take notes on what you’re learning, sketch your own illustrations as memory aids, fix things in your mind. You can create your own textbook or field guide, and I guarantee it will stick with you better!

Sketch the birds or wildflowers in your own backyard; robins are not regular visitors here in January, so I was delighted for the chance to document their brief stay.

**Exercise**

Give it a try! Sketch your favorite yoga or tai chi poses, diagram that anatomy lesson, make a habitat sketch if you’re learning about ecology. Study the Old Masters to try to reproduce their effects in your journal. Make all the notes you need.

**Nature Study**

We talked about creating your own field guide, above...you may find lifelong satisfaction in using your journal to study your home state, or the environments of different states or countries. This is a very traditional form of journal-keeping—and a very satisfying one. Gilbert White’s *Natural History of Selborne* was first published in 1789, and has seen numerous reprints right up to the present day. *The Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady*, by Edith Holden, has been popular for decades, and inspired the focus of my own journal keeping, back in the 70s. Clare Walker Leslie, Hannah Hinchman, and many more have brought the discipline into the 21st Century.

And check out our little video demo on [Sketching in Nature](#), at the link.
Exercise:

Choose a subject that really interests you—in my case it’s often the plants that volunteer in my yard (OK, weeds) or the wildlife that visits my feeders. We keep feeders well stocked year round, and I’m able to capture a casual field guide to one small corner of Missouri, whatever the season.

Do quick sketches or longer studies; use your observations to trigger more questions. Stick to black and white or go full color. Look up the answers in a formal text, the Internet, or find an expert to ask—and write those answers right on your journal page.

Note the date, any weather notes you’d like, questions or interesting observations; sounds, activity, what the bird or animal is feeding on, what the tracks look like in the snow. You’ll develop a whole new relationship with nature and your environment.

Take a peek at my Sierra Club short on YouTube!
Your nature sketches can be quick, rough suggestions

I just did the very fastest kind of sketch of the birds near my feeder, little more than outlines in most cases. If there was time I added color and a little more detail (easier if the bird returned to the same or a similar position.)

As you can see, I listed all the birds I’d seen that day in the middle column.

Demo:

First, I did a simple sketch of the feeder outside my shed window, using a black Micron Pigma pen—couldn’t resist the peeping sparrow!

I added simple watercolor washes, which go well with linework. A medium Aquash waterbrush worked well for the lettering.

And finally I added a block of text and additional notes that helped preserve the day for me—I was excited, this was my first feeder and first visitor at the shed!
Planning the Future

Perhaps you’ve decided to build a home–or a studio, chicken house, or a special outdoor play structure for your kiddoes. Maybe you’re designing a new kitchen, or a stage set, or costumes for that play. Or you want to write a book and illustrate it. Whatever, your journal is a great place to keep a record of thoughts and ideas and changes!

*Go ahead, collage in photos or even fabric or wallpaper samples–or sketch them, instead.*

I was planning a little booklet* on moccasins in history, and did the research sketches right in my journal; the illustration at left is the cover showing one of the moccasins I found in a local museum.

I sketched ideas and plans for the little shed studio where I sit typing this. From the initial possibilities of size and shape and roofline to the final plan–which my builder friend used as a blueprint–it’s all there in my journal! I sketched the placement of the furniture inside, too—in a 10' x 10' space you need to think about what will work!

You can see more about that in my blog, *The Shed of Reality; A Place Called Sanity*, here: [http://artists-shed.blogspot.com/](http://artists-shed.blogspot.com/)

The finished shed–now my little studio

**Exercise:**

Let your imagination soar! Sketch out floor plans, new outfits, a gazebo you’ve always wanted, or like my friend Liz Steel, everything she plans to take in the way of art supplies on one of her world travels, as noted. Make a dedicated planning and dreaming journal, if you want, or just include planning in your regular journal.
Travel Journals

This is one of my favorite things to put in my journals. Do keep your supplies somewhat simple when traveling, though...it’s hard to take every tool in your arsenal! New sights, sounds, costumes, tastes...the ocean is pretty impressive to a landlocked old girl, and I love the structures that pop up around it, like this lifeguard’s shack.

I didn’t have much time, this day, so this was a very quick sketch with watercolor and a small ink pen dipped in a stronger wash—no pencil drawing guidelines.

I draw the landscapes, seascapes, birds, seashells, mountains, flowers, architecture, new foods, people...even the ones I share airport waiting rooms with. Hey, free models!

When we were in California a few years ago I finally got to realize a lifelong dream...the LaBrea Tarpits! I’m fascinated by fossils and geology, and this was a dream come true. I was like a kid in a candy store! And then, on to the ocean, as you can see. Does life get much better?
In Nevada, I sketch the red rocks, the plants that thrive there, and the desert wildlife—and my sis and brother in law, downtown of old Henderson, Nevada, and even the courtyard of our hotel. It’s nice to get up early while it’s still cool in the desert and enjoy a landscape very different from our home.

If you can, find a time you can work on your own for a bit if you don’t have a fellow sketcher or a supportive and understanding spouse or travel buddy. Maybe while they are shopping or hitting the casino! Get up earlier if you can, and grab a little time for yourself. When I was in Maine teaching a watercolor workshop years ago, I got up around 4:00 am every day so I’d have time to sketch my unfamiliar environs before I had to get to work. It got light much earlier there, and the time alone was wonderful!

Catch my mixed media YouTube video of the Nevada landscape, from my old Strathmore class, if you haven’t seen it before!

**Exercise:**

Look at your surroundings with new eyes. What catches your attention? What makes you ask the question “what is THAT? Who built that, how did that land formation happen?” Whatever your own most attentive questions are…capture them in your journal.

Work fast, if you have to; simplify madly if time is short as I did the mountains at the top of the page at left; you’ll remember the details—or the moment.

If you’re really short of time or traveling with non-sketchers you may want to use only one or two tools, as I did here; you can always add color later.
A quick sketch of my niece, Jenny, was supplemented by a little collage—the paper envelope our chopsticks came in, from our shared meal. I find I love bits and pieces of ephemera pasted into my travel journals to really capture the feeling. It makes for a richly textured, meaningful image. (It can be useful if you need that address or phone number on that business card, too!)

**Growth of a Pet, Skill, Garden, Child**

Of course tracking growth is a wonderful use for your journals—either reserve a special one for just that, or return to the same subject again and again. (You can always scan the images and keep them all together in a virtual journal!)

Here’s Ellis as a wee kitten and again so big he wouldn’t fit on a page!
Gardeners have kept journals for centuries; some of the earliest herbals were nothing more than a journal, with notes on planning, culture, properties, and hand-drawn illustrations. Jane Colden was one of the earliest in this country, creating her *Botanic Manuscript* between 1753 and 1758. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jane_Colden

Planning the planting layout, tracking the progression of the plant from seed to harvest through the seasons, is most satisfying!

You may be able to draw unusual plants or things you normally can’t pick up in the grocery store (when’s the last time you saw green tomatoes if not fresh from the garden?) Or plant a single seed and track its sprouting...

Track your own evolving skills—designing, sewing, golf, yoga, for instance. Draw yourself in the mirror!

Doing physical therapy? Journal your exercises so you don’t forget them, I did!

**Try this:**

Use very simple figures—even stick figures—to suggest your exercises. If you prefer, make them a simple shape all in one color. (I used several different styles for my PT exercises, depending on how much time I had.)
Fantasy Journals

Your journals don’t have to be about your real life! This is a wonderful place to explore, to exercise your imagination, to play.

Roz Stendahl started the International Fake Journal Month a few years back—not surprisingly starting with April Fool’s Day—wherein she encourages people to write as whomever (or whatever) they like! Write as a dog, a child, an alien, someone from another century. Journalers make up their own identity, and tell their story. Have FUN. Check out her Official International Fake Journal Blog.

Laure Ferlita offers Imaginary Trips to places we may never be able to visit; it’s ingenious, and her students have a wonderful time. They’ve “traveled” to Paris, Ireland, England, Australia, Greece, San Francisco, New Zealand and more. (She also offers Imaginary Visits, to a season or the beach, as well as Independent Learning Classes, videos and more. Great resources!)

My own fantasy journal was just that. During a very difficult period in our lives, Joseph’s mom was suffering from dementia—and everyone else was suffering right along with her. We were getting 5-6 phone calls a day—from her, from J’s sister, from her caregiver, and it was making us both crazy! As a freelancer working from home, I found it really difficult to concentrate or get anything done, and my poor husband was in a constant turmoil every time the phone rang.

So, I came up with my fantasy journal—mini-escapes we took, just the two of us in our imaginary camper, with our imaginary cat, Jax, who loved to travel. (None of our real ones do!) We went to the deep woods, the lake, the beach, the mountains—I’d sketch and play the whole time he was on the phone, with cartoonish drawings and lots of color. And oddly enough, it made it easier to bear for both of us—we managed to have fun, despite the difficult situation.
Why not use YOUR journal to create a different reality for yourself, even for a brief period? I guarantee it’s therapeutic! Here’s my Flickr set if you’d like to wander the country with us...

Or if you prefer, check out our Fantasy Journal video, here!

I hope you enjoyed Lesson Three! Next week we’ll get a bit more serious and look at all of the things you can do—and consider what you WANT to. We’ll look at ways that your journal can help you change your life, and in the direction you choose.

By now you should have a good idea what mediums and approaches suit you and the way you want to journal. Hopefully you will have developed a habit. Now, we’ll see where it can take us.

*Walk Softly* is now an eBook, available in my website catalog. 
http://cathyjohnson.info/books.html