

The Ultimate Guide to Paint by Numbers

Everything worth knowing before, during
and after your first canvas

LEDGEBAY

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How to use this guide

You are probably reading this because there was a card in your kit. That means the box is already on the table, which changes what a guide like this should do.

So this is not a sales brochure with a chapter list. It is arranged the way the work actually happens. The early chapters explain what you are holding and why it is built the way it is. The middle chapters are the ones to read with a brush in your hand. The last few are about what to do when the painting is finished, and what to think about if you decide to do another one.

You do not need to read it in order. Three ways in:

If you have not started yet. Read Chapter 1, then skip to Chapter 5 and set up your table. Come back to Chapters 2 to 4 later, when you are thinking about a second canvas. They are about choosing, and you have already chosen.

If you are partway through and something has gone wrong. Go straight to Chapter 13. It is the longest chapter in the book for a reason. Paint that has thickened is Chapter 10. Numbers you cannot read is Chapter 6. Paint that will not cover is Chapter 9.

If you have finished and want to hang it. Chapter 12, and read Chapter 3 first if your canvas came rolled rather than on a wooden frame. There is an honest limitation there you should know about before you buy a frame.

A note on what we will not do

We are a company that sells these kits, and you can see that plainly. There are links in this guide to things we sell, placed where they are genuinely the answer to the question in front of you and nowhere else. There are roughly twenty of them in 126 pages.

What we have tried hard not to do is tell you things are easier than they are. Several chapters say plainly that a particular design is hard, that a particular finish has a limitation, or that something in the box is the part people most often replace. That is more useful to you than enthusiasm, and it is the reason this guide is worth the length.

One thing to do now, before you read on

If your canvas arrived rolled in a tube, take it out and lay it flat under something heavy — a couple of books at the corners will do. Leave it while you read. It will be flat by the time you want to start, and you will not have to iron anything.

CHAPTER 1

What this is, and what it isn't

What it is

A paint by numbers kit is a picture that has been taken apart for you.

Someone has taken a finished painting, reduced it to a set of flat areas that each hold a single color, printed the outlines of those areas onto canvas, and put a number in each one. The numbers match numbered pots of acrylic paint. You put the paint where the number tells you to. When every area is filled, the picture reassembles itself.

That is the whole mechanism, and it is worth understanding because everything else in this guide follows from it. There is no drawing. There is no mixing. There is no decision about which color goes where — that decision was made when the design was separated, and it is why someone with no painting experience can produce something that reads as a real picture on the first attempt.

What you supply is patience and a steady hand. That is not a small thing, but it is a different thing from artistic skill, and people who describe themselves as having no talent for art finish these all the time.

What is actually in the box

Every Ledgebay stock kit contains:

- A pre-printed cotton canvas, numbered section by section
- A full set of acrylic paints, vacuum-sealed so they arrive moist
- Four brushes in different sizes, with wooden handles
- Printed instructions and a full-color reference photo
- An 11 by 17 inch printout of the design

If you bought a framed size, there is also a small wooden tabletop easel. Unframed canvases do not include one, because there is nothing yet to stand up.

That 11 by 17 printout is the most underrated item in the box and most people leave it in the bag. It is not packaging. It is a map. When a section of the canvas is printed too faintly to read, or when two greens are close enough that you cannot tell which is which, the printout is how you settle it. Keep it beside you, not under the canvas.

What it isn't

It is not a reproduction of the photograph on the box. This is the single most common surprise, and it turns up in customer reviews regularly. One review of a heavily detailed woodland design puts it as well as we could: the picture came out beautiful, but it did not really match the image that came with it.

That gap is not a printing fault. It is what happens when a painting with soft gradations is separated into flat areas. A sunset that moves smoothly through forty shades becomes eleven bands of color. Painted well, it reads as that sunset from across the room. Held six inches from your face it reads as bands. Both of those things are true at the same time, and the finished canvas lives on a wall rather than in your hands.

It is not quick. Chapter 4 goes into how much this varies, but no design here is an afternoon. The most common thing people say about finishing one is some version of "it took longer than I thought and I did not mind".

It is not fine art, and it is not trying to be. You did not compose the picture and you did not choose the palette. What you did was spend twenty or sixty hours doing something absorbing with your hands, and end up with an object rather than nothing. People are sometimes apologetic about this. There is no reason to be. The reviews for these kits talk far more about the evenings than the result — a grad student painting between reading assignments, a family working on one canvas through a

long winter, a teenager who spends hours on it and feels she has got little done and comes back to it anyway.

Why the canvas comes rolled

Nearly every kit on the market ships its canvas folded, which puts permanent creases through the print. Ours ship rolled in a tube. Of the 165 customer reviews we have on the stock designs, seventeen mention this without being asked, which makes it the single most-praised thing about the product — more than the artwork, the paints or the price.

The trade-off is that a rolled canvas arrives curled and needs to be weighted flat for a few hours. That is the whole cost, and it is a better problem than a crease you cannot remove.

Who made the designs

The stock designs are licensed original paintings by working artists, reproduced as numbered kits, rather than generic stock images. That matters more than it sounds. A composition built by a painter holds together when it is reduced to flat areas, because the painter was already thinking in masses of tone. Images that were never composed as paintings tend to fall apart when you separate them.

Ledgebay is a veteran-owned business. Customers notice, and occasionally say so in a review before we ever mention it.

Further reading: [How To Do A Paint By Numbers For Beginners](#)

CHAPTER 2

Choosing a size

If you are already holding a kit, this chapter is about two things: understanding why yours behaves the way it does, and choosing better next time. Size is the decision that affects your experience more than the design does, and it is the one people put the least thought into.

The sizes that exist

Ledgebay stock designs come in two sizes:

size	finishes available	what it is
12 x 16 inches	framed only	the smaller canvas, pre-stretched on a wooden frame
16 x 20 inches	framed or unframed	the larger canvas, and the only size sold unframed

There is no unframed 12 x 16. If you want the smaller canvas, it comes on a frame.

Custom kits made from your own photograph add a third size, **18 x 24 inches**, and offer all three sizes in either finish. That is

covered in Chapter 14.

Why bigger is easier

This is the part that surprises people, so it is worth being precise about.

A 16 by 20 canvas has 320 square inches of surface. A 12 by 16 has 192. That is **two thirds more area for the same picture**. The design is not more detailed on the larger canvas — it is the same design, printed larger. Every numbered section, every printed line, every digit in every section is proportionally bigger.

So the larger canvas is easier in three specific ways:

The numbers are easier to read. They are printed at the same relative size, which means they are physically larger. If you wear reading glasses for close work, this is the single most useful thing in this chapter.

The sections are easier to fill. A section that is a comfortable two brush-strokes wide on a 16 by 20 is a fiddly one-stroke sliver on a 12 by 16. Fine detail is where people get tired and where mistakes happen.

You are less likely to paint over a line. The lines are further apart. There is more margin for a hand that is not perfectly steady.

The cost is time. More area is more painting, and a 16 by 20 will take you meaningfully longer than the same design at 12 by 16. It

is also a bigger object to find a wall for, which is a real consideration and one people forget while looking at a screen.

A rule that holds up well: choose the smaller canvas if you want a shorter project or have a specific small space in mind. Choose the larger one for everything else, and always choose it if close detail work is difficult for you.

What each size needs from your table

Worth thinking about before you buy, because it decides where you will actually paint.

A **12 by 16** framed canvas is a manageable object. It fits on the tabletop easel with room in front of it for an open palette, two water pots and a paper towel, on a kitchen table you still want to eat at. It also sits comfortably on a lap desk or a tray, which matters if you would rather paint in an armchair than at a table.

A **16 by 20** wants a dedicated surface. Not a large one, but somewhere you can leave it out. Once the canvas, the paint pots, the water and the 11 by 17 printout are all within reach, you are using most of a card table. The single biggest predictor of whether one of these gets finished is whether you have somewhere to leave it set up between sittings, and the larger canvas is much less pleasant to pack away and re-lay every evening.

If the only surface available is one you have to clear for meals, the smaller canvas is the realistic choice, and the honest one.

How the design interacts with the size

Size and difficulty are not independent, and this is where the real decision sits.

A design built from large shapes — broad water, banks of flowers, open sky — is forgiving at either size. A design built from many small elements, fine lines or dense foliage is demanding at 16 by 20 and genuinely hard at 12 by 16, because the smallest sections shrink below the width of a comfortable brushstroke.

One customer described needing a magnifying glass in places on a detailed design. Another said of a particularly intricate one that it is not for anyone without the patience to stay inside very small lines. Neither was complaining about the printing. They had put a demanding design on a canvas that made it more demanding.

So the rule is: the more detailed the design, the more the size matters. Chapter 4 gives you three signals for reading how detailed a design is before you commit.

Where it will hang

People choose a size by looking at a picture on a screen, where everything is the same size. Then the finished painting arrives on a wall and is either right or slightly wrong, and slightly wrong is hard to unsee.

Two minutes with a tape measure settles it. Find the wall you have in mind and measure the space you want the painting to occupy. As a rough guide that decorators use: a single piece looks settled when it fills somewhere between half and two thirds of the width of the furniture beneath it. Above a standard three-seat sofa, a 16 by 20 hung portrait-way looks modest and a little lost on its own; the same canvas over a side table or in a hallway looks properly placed.

Viewing distance matters too, and it cuts the other way from what you might expect. These paintings resolve better from further away, because distance is what blends the flat areas of color back into a picture. A canvas at the end of a room reads as a painting. The same canvas at arm's length in a narrow hallway reads as sections. If the spot you have in mind is somewhere people pass close by, the larger size is the more forgiving choice — its sections are bigger, so it holds together better under close inspection.

One practical note on frames. Both of our sizes are standard US frame sizes, so if you ever want to re-frame a painted canvas you will find off-the-shelf options easily. That is deliberate. Read

Chapter 3 before you rely on it for an unframed canvas, though — there is a limit there.

Size, sittings and momentum

The number that actually predicts enjoyment is not total hours. It is how much visible progress you make in one sitting.

Filling in a large area of sky and being able to see that you have done it is satisfying. Spending ninety minutes on a region the size of a playing card and standing back to find the painting looks unchanged is where people put a canvas in a cupboard. One customer described exactly this: her teenager spends hours on it, feels she gets little done, and comes back to it anyway. That is a teenager with unusual patience.

Larger sections give you more visible progress per hour, which is another way of saying the larger canvas of a given design tends to feel better to paint even though it takes longer overall. If you know you are the sort of person who needs to see movement, size up.

Choosing a size for someone else

If this is a gift, choose the size for the person rather than for the picture.

For anyone who uses reading glasses for close work, choose 16 by 20. This is the most useful single recommendation in this chapter. Twelve of our own customer reviews mention difficulty

reading the printed numbers, and the larger canvas is the direct answer — the digits are physically bigger on it. Pairing it with good light, as Chapter 6 describes, removes the problem almost entirely.

For a first-time painter of any age, choose framed. Not for the frame, but because it removes every decision except painting. They open the box, stand the canvas on the easel and start.

For a child or a younger teenager, pick a design with large shapes and expect to sit with them for the first session. Our reviews suggest these suit an older child or teenager upward — one customer put the floor at teenager or adult, and several bought them successfully for teenagers.

Further reading: [Paint by Numbers Kits for Seniors: How to Choose One](#)

What size will not fix

Two honest limits, so you are not choosing on a false premise.

Size will not change how faintly the outlines are printed. The print is deliberately light — Chapter 6 explains why, and it is a better reason than you might expect. A bigger canvas gives you bigger faint lines, not darker ones.

Size will not make the finished painting look more like the photograph. The separation into flat areas happens before printing and is the same at every size.

Where to look

- [Unframed canvases](#) — 16 x 20 only, the lowest-cost way to buy a design
- [12 x 16 framed](#) — the smaller canvas, ready to hang
- [16 x 20 framed](#) — the larger canvas, ready to hang

Further reading: [Paint by Numbers Canvas Sizes and Difficulty Levels](#)

CHAPTER 3

Framed or unframed

This chapter contains the most important limitation in this guide. If you read nothing else in these 126 pages, read the section headed "The honest limit".

The two finishes

Framed canvases arrive already stretched over a wooden frame, taut and ready. You paint on a rigid surface, and when you put the brush down the painting is finished — there is nothing to mount, nothing to buy, and no separate frame to size. Framed kits also include a small wooden tabletop easel, so the canvas can stand up while you work on it and afterwards.

Unframed canvases arrive as a flat sheet, rolled in a protective tube. You paint on the sheet, usually on a table or a board. It is the lower-cost way to buy the same design, same canvas, same paints. It is available on the 16 by 20 only.

Which is easier to paint on

Framed, clearly, and for a reason that is not obvious until you have done both.

A stretched canvas has give. It sits slightly proud of its frame, and a brush pressed into it meets a consistent surface. A loose sheet on a table has no give at all, so the brush meets whatever is underneath — the table, a crumb, the edge of a book. It also shifts as you work unless you tape it down, and it curls at the corners for the first few hours.

None of this makes an unframed canvas hard to paint. Plenty of people prefer working flat on a table. But if you are choosing purely on comfort, the stretched canvas is the easier surface.

The honest limit

Our unframed canvases are trimmed close to the printed image. There is not enough margin to stretch one over a wooden frame afterwards, and you should not buy one on the assumption that you can.

We are stating this plainly because customers have run into it and told us so. Their words, from reviews on our own product pages:

- One found the canvas cut too short to staple to a frame, and glued it to a board instead.
- Another found the print trimmed so close to the edge that there was no excess to staple, and mounted it with spray adhesive.
- A third measured it against a bought 16 by 20 frame and found the canvas about a quarter of an inch short.

- A fourth said simply that the lack of a border means there is no way to frame it when it is done.

That is four independent people describing the same thing, and one of them measuring it. So this is not a rare defect or a bad batch. It is how the unframed canvas is cut.

A fifth review is the one that stayed with us: a customer gave an otherwise excellent design four stars specifically because someone starting out would not know that an unframed canvas needs to be mounted on something before or after painting. They were right, and closing that gap is part of why this guide exists.

So what can you do with a finished unframed canvas

Three things that work, in the order we would try them.

Mount it on a rigid board. Spray adhesive onto a foam board or a hardboard panel cut to size, lay the canvas down from the center outwards, and smooth it flat. This is what both customers above ended up doing and it produces a clean result. It is also the cheapest option.

Use a frame with a lip that covers the edge. A standard 16 by 20 frame with a mat or a rabbet will hide the trimmed border. Because the canvas can run a fraction under size, choose a frame with a mat rather than one that relies on the canvas filling the opening exactly.

Glue it to a pre-stretched blank canvas. A blank 16 by 20 stretched canvas from an art shop makes a rigid backing that already has a finished edge, and the result looks like a stretched painting.

What we would not do is buy stretcher bars and plan to staple. There is not enough canvas.

Mounting on a board, step by step

This is the method we would use, and it takes about fifteen minutes.

- 1 **Let the paint cure first.** Acrylic is touch-dry in under an hour but keeps hardening for several days. Give a finished canvas at least twenty-four hours before you handle it face down, and longer if the paint went on thickly.
- 2 **Cut the board to the canvas, not to the frame size.** Measure your actual painted sheet — it may run slightly under 16 by 20 — and cut foam board or hardboard to match. A craft shop will often cut it for you.
- 3 **Work on a clean flat surface** and have something heavy and flat ready, such as a large book.
- 4 **Spray the board, not the canvas.** An even coat of repositionable spray adhesive on the board gives you a moment to place the canvas. Spraying the painted side is a mistake you cannot undo.

- 5 **Lay the canvas down from the center outward.** Touch the middle down first, then smooth toward the edges with the flat of your hand. Working from one edge across traps air.
- 6 **Weight it flat and leave it overnight.**

If you would rather not use adhesive at all, a frame with a mat is the no-risk option. The mat overlaps the edge of the canvas, so the trim is never visible and nothing is glued to anything.

While you are painting an unframed canvas

Two small things that make a loose sheet behave.

Tape the corners down to your work surface with low-tack masking tape or painter's tape, not household sticky tape, which can lift the printed surface when removed. Put something rigid underneath — a sheet of card or a placemat — so the brush meets a consistent surface rather than the grain of the table.

About the easel

The tabletop easel included with framed kits is a small wooden A-frame that holds the canvas at a slight angle. It is easy to dismiss as a token extra, and it is genuinely useful for two reasons: an angled canvas is much kinder to your neck over a long sitting than a flat one, and it lets you stand the painting up at the end of an evening to look at it properly from across the room, which is the distance these are designed to be seen from.

It is sized for the canvas it ships with. It is not built to hold a heavy framed piece from elsewhere, so treat it as part of this kit

rather than as a general-purpose easel.

A note on packaging, if it is a gift

Framed kits ship boxed and unframed kits ship in a tube. Both arrive well protected, but the boxed framed kit is the one that looks like a present when it is handed over. The tube needs wrapping, and the canvas inside needs flattening before anyone can begin, which is a slightly deflating first ten minutes on a birthday.

Choosing between them

choose framed if	choose unframed if
you want it finished when you stop painting	you want the lowest price on a design
you want the easel, and a rigid surface	you are happy to mount it yourself
you want the 12 x 16 size at all	you have a framing plan already
it is a gift and the recipient should just open and start	you prefer working flat on a table

For a gift, framed is the better answer nearly every time. The recipient opens it, stands it on the easel and begins. An unframed canvas asks them to solve a mounting problem months later, and that is a poor thing to hand someone.

Where to look

- 12 x 16 framed
- 16 x 20 framed
- Unframed

Further reading: Frame or Mount? Finishing an Unframed
Paint by Numbers Canvas

CHAPTER 4

How hard is it, really

Almost every kit sold anywhere carries a difficulty rating, and almost all of them are close to useless. A rating of three out of five tells you nothing about what will actually be hard on a Tuesday evening.

Difficulty in a paint by numbers kit is not a property of the brand or the price. **It is a property of the individual design**, and it is driven by three things you can assess yourself in about thirty seconds by looking at the picture.

The three signals

1. How many colors are in the set

More colors means more distinctions to make, more pot changes, and more washing out between them. It also means the colors sit closer together on the spectrum, which is the real problem: two greens that differ slightly are two greens you can mix up.

This is a genuine and recurring difficulty. One customer found two yellows in a set too similar to distinguish, and the black and dark brown likewise. The fix is Chapter 7's, but the point here is

that a large palette is a harder palette, not just a richer one.

2. How small the smallest sections are

This matters more than everything else combined.

Look at the busiest part of the design — usually foliage, water reflections, hair, brickwork, or a crowd of small flowers. If the smallest sections there are narrower than a comfortable brushstroke, that part of the canvas will take a disproportionate share of your total time. One customer reported seven hours on the trees of a single design. Another described a design with a great many small straight lines, which is fiddly in a specific way that broad detail is not.

Small sections are also where the printed numbers become hardest to read, because a small area holds a small digit.

3. How dark the design is overall

A dark design is harder for two compounding reasons. Dark paint on a dark printed line hides the line you are trying to stay inside, and the numbers in dark areas are the hardest to read on the whole canvas.

Related, and worth knowing before you buy: a design can be technically easy and still be dull to paint. One customer said of a mostly gray-and-black design that it was the one they were most likely to hang, and the least entertaining to paint, because there was so little color variation. Large areas of a single flat tone are quick, and they are also boring. Difficulty and enjoyment are two

different axes.

What difficulty does not depend on

Not the size, directly — but size multiplies whatever the design already is. See Chapter 2.

Not whether you can paint. There is no drawing and no color mixing. Experience helps with brush control and patience, and that is about all it helps with. The reviews of our hardest designs are full of people on their first canvas who finished them, and people on their seventh who found them demanding.

Not the price. A demanding design costs the same as a forgiving one.

How long will it take

The honest answer is a wide range, and anyone who gives you a single number is guessing.

For a **forgiving design on a 16 by 20**, most adults spend somewhere between **10 and 20 hours**, spread over several sittings.

For a **highly detailed design**, that figure can be three or four times higher. Real reports from our own reviews, at the two extremes: one customer finished a straightforward design in a day and another in three days, while a customer working on a detailed design an hour a day estimated at least two months, and a customer painting a very intricate house scene described

hundreds of hours.

Both ends of that are true. They were painting different designs.

The useful way to think about it: a paint by numbers canvas is not a task with a duration. It is somewhere to put your hands for as many evenings as you want. The people who enjoy these most are the ones who stopped counting.

What people actually find hard

We went through 165 customer reviews of our own kits and sorted every difficulty people reported. The ranking is not what most guides would tell you, and it is worth knowing because three of the four have straightforward fixes.

- 1. Reading the printed numbers.** Comfortably the most common, and the subject of Chapter 6. The outlines and digits are printed lightly. Some people barely notice; others find sections where the number is genuinely hard to make out. It is largely solvable with light and magnification.
- 2. Telling close colors apart.** Two greens, two yellows, a black and a very dark brown. This is a palette problem rather than an eyesight problem, and the fix is to label and organize the pots before you start rather than to squint at them mid-brushstroke. Chapter 7 covers the method.

3. Very small sections. Not solvable by technique, only by a finer brush and accepting that those regions take longer. This is the one genuine difficulty of the four.

4. Paint coverage over the printed line. Some colors need a second pass to cover cleanly. Chapter 9 is entirely about this and it is a normal part of the process rather than a fault.

Notice what is not on that list: nothing about artistic ability, and nothing about not knowing what to do. The mechanism does that work for you. The difficulties are practical and they have practical answers.

Making a demanding design easier

If you already own a design that is turning out to be harder than you expected, you are not stuck. Five things that genuinely help, in order of how much difference they make.

Fix the light before anything else. Most difficulty that presents as "I cannot see the numbers" is a lighting problem wearing a disguise. A directed lamp close to the canvas changes more than any other single intervention. Chapter 6.

Do the hard region first, while you are fresh. People naturally save the fiddly foliage for last, by which point they are tired of the painting and it becomes a chore that stops the whole thing being finished. Reverse it. Do the dense area in your first few sittings and let the broad easy masses be your reward.

Get one finer brush. The four brushes in the box cover most of a design well. For the very smallest sections many painters add a size 10/0 or 20/0 liner from a craft shop, which costs very little. One of our own customers mentioned using exactly those sizes on an intricate design, along with a pin to keep tiny lines open.

Keep the 11 by 17 printout beside you, not underneath the canvas. When a number is unreadable, the printout tells you which color belongs there. This is what it is for.

Work in shorter sittings on the detailed parts. Precision degrades with fatigue faster than patience does. Forty focused minutes on dense detail beats two tired hours, and the mistakes made in hour two are the ones that need repainting.

Reading a design before you buy it

Put the three signals together and look at the product photograph:

Likely forgiving. Large shapes. Open water, sky, broad banks of flowers, big architectural masses. Clear separation between light and dark. A moderate palette.

Likely demanding. Dense foliage. Many small figures or windows. Fine straight lines. Detailed animal fur or feathers. Reflections broken into many narrow bands. A large palette with several close shades.

Neither is better. A demanding design produces the more striking finished painting, which is exactly why people take them

on. Just choose it on purpose rather than by accident, and give it the larger canvas.

Worked examples from our own catalog

Assessed against customer reviews as of September 2026.

Designs come and go — the three signals above are the part that keeps working.

Forgiving, good for a first canvas

- [Still Waters](#) — broad calm water and large flower masses, with clear separation between the lit cabin and the dark treeline
- [Mountain Paradise](#) — one customer notes the lines and numbers are clear enough to read without reading glasses
- [Hummingbird](#) — a customer who finished it described it simply as easy to paint

Demanding, and worth it if you want the challenge

- [Bamboo Tiger](#) — very intricate, with a great many small spaces. One reviewer who has painted many kits says it is not really for beginners, but not impossible
- [Rita's Pansies](#) — incredibly detailed. Needs patience and the ability to stay inside very small lines
- [Orchard Puzzle](#) — one customer's seventh kit and, in their words, the most challenging of them

If you are choosing a demanding design, take it at 16 by 20.

Chapter 2 explains why.

Further reading: [How Hard Is Paint by Numbers, Really?](#) · [The Hardest Paint by Numbers Kits, and What Makes Them Hard](#)

CHAPTER 5

Your workspace in ten minutes

You do not need a studio, a spare room or a proper easel. You need a surface you can leave alone, decent light and about ten minutes of setting up. This chapter is the ten minutes.

The setup, in order

- 1 **Flatten the canvas** if it arrived rolled. Start this first because it takes the longest.
- 2 **Put the canvas where the light is**, not where the chair is. More on this below.
- 3 **Fill two water pots**. Not one. This is the most useful sentence in the chapter.
- 4 **Fold a paper towel** into quarters and put it to your dominant side.
- 5 **Lay the 11 by 17 printout** where you can see it without moving the canvas.
- 6 **Sort the paint pots** into number order and leave the lids on.

- 7 **Sit down and check the reach.** Everything you need should be reachable without standing.

That is the whole thing. The rest of this chapter is why each step is worth doing properly.

Flattening a rolled canvas

Ours ship rolled in a tube rather than folded, which is why they arrive without a crease. The cost is that the canvas wants to curl for the first few hours.

Lay it face up on a flat surface and weight the four corners with books. Leave it for two or three hours, or overnight if you can. That is all it needs, and it will stay flat afterwards.

Two things not to do. **Do not iron the painted side of a canvas**, ever, and be careful about ironing the printed side even before you start — direct heat can affect the printed lines. If you must speed it up, roll the canvas gently backwards against its own curl for a few seconds, which relaxes it without heat. And do not leave it weighted under something that will mark it, such as a book with a textured cover, on a warm windowsill.

Further reading: [How to Flatten a Paint by Number Canvas](#)

Two water pots

One pot for the first rinse, one for the second. Any two jars will do.

The reason is straightforward. A single pot becomes muddy gray water within about twenty minutes, and after that every brush you dip comes out slightly dirty. You do not notice it happening, and it shows up as colors that look duller on the canvas than they do in the pot. Rinsing in the dirty pot first and finishing in the clean one keeps the second pot usable for hours.

Change both when the second one clouds. It costs nothing and it is the difference between colors that stay true and colors that drift.

Where to sit, and the light

Put the light so it comes over your **non-dominant shoulder**. If you are right-handed, that means light from your left. Otherwise your painting hand casts a shadow across exactly the section you are working on, which is a small annoyance that compounds over forty hours.

Overhead room lighting alone is rarely enough for this. Chapter 6 is entirely about light, because poor light is the single biggest cause of the most common frustration people report with these kits. If you read one other chapter before starting, read that one.

Sit at a height where you are looking down at the canvas rather than across it, and where your forearm can rest on the table. A hand unsupported in mid-air is a hand that shakes, and brush control is almost entirely a matter of having your wrist or forearm resting on something.

Handling the paint

Keep the lids on the pots you are not using. Acrylic starts to skin over within minutes of being opened, and an afternoon with twenty-four open pots is how a set of paints dries out. Open one, use it, close it.

Sort them into number order before you start. It takes a minute and it saves you hunting for number seventeen every time it comes round.

You do not need a palette. Most people work straight from the pot, which is what these are designed for. What does help is a scrap of aluminum foil or a ceramic tile beside you, for the times when you want to thin a little paint with water without thinning the whole pot. Chapter 8 covers thinning.

The two printed sheets are not the same thing

Worth separating, because people conflate them and then leave the more useful one in the bag.

Your kit contains a **full-color reference photo** and, separately, an **11 by 17 inch printout of the design**. The reference photo shows you what the finished painting looks like — it answers "what am I aiming at". The 11 by 17 printout shows the numbered layout at a readable size — it answers "which color goes in this section". They do different jobs and you want both within sight.

The printout is the one that saves you. When a number on the canvas will not resolve, that sheet is where you look, and one of

our customers said explicitly that it was what made an awkwardly-printed canvas workable. Chapter 6 covers how to use it properly.

Protecting the table, and putting it away

Put something down first. A sheet of newspaper is fine; an old towel is better because it also stops a loose canvas sliding. Acrylic is water-based and wipes off a hard surface easily while wet, and is stubborn once dry, so the thirty seconds of covering the table is worth it.

When you stop for the night, three things. Stand the paint pots **upright** — a pot on its side with a lid that is not quite seated will empty itself overnight. Put the brushes down flat rather than in water. And if the canvas is somewhere dusty or where a cat goes, lay a clean sheet of paper over it, because dust settling into wet acrylic sets into it permanently.

How long a sitting should be

Longer than you think for the broad areas, shorter than you think for the detailed ones.

Filling a sky is pleasant for a couple of hours. Fine detail degrades with fatigue quite sharply, and the mistakes you make in the second hour of close work are the ones you end up repainting. If you are working on a dense region, forty focused minutes and then a break is more productive than pushing

through.

There is no virtue in finishing quickly. One of our customers described using these as a break between reading assignments, another as something to pick up for twenty minutes at a time. Both of those are the intended use.

Two things worth having that are not in the box

A pin or a toothpick. For keeping very fine printed lines open when the paint wants to close over them, and for lifting a stray brush hair off wet paint. This is a trick from our own catalog — one customer noted it being used on a particularly intricate design.

One finer brush, if your design has a lot of small detail. A size 10/0 or 20/0 liner from a craft shop costs very little. See Chapter 8 for whether you actually need one.

Leaving it set up

The strongest predictor of whether one of these gets finished is whether you can leave it out.

A canvas that has to be packed away and re-laid every evening becomes a chore, and the ten minutes of setup happens every single time rather than once. If you can give it a corner of a table, a card table, or a tray that slides under the sofa with everything still on it, do that. It is worth more than any technique in this

book.

CHAPTER 6

Light, magnification and faint numbers

This is the chapter we most wanted to write, because the thing it addresses is the most common frustration people report with these kits and it is almost entirely solvable.

The problem, stated plainly

The outlines and numbers printed on the canvas are light. On some designs and in some areas they are light enough to be genuinely difficult to read.

We are not going to pretend otherwise, because our own customers say so. Of 165 reviews of our stock designs, twelve mention difficulty reading the printed numbers — more than mention any other single difficulty. One customer found the printing very light and hard to see in places. Another found some numbers and spaces too small to make out. A third reported a design where a few sections appeared to carry no number at all.

Those are real reports and they are worth taking seriously.

Why the print is light

Here is the part that is rarely explained, and it changes how you think about it.

The printing is light on purpose, and the reason is that dark printing shows through finished paint. A boldly printed number under a pale color is a number you can still see when the painting is done. It sits there in the finished sky, permanently. Light printing is the trade: harder to read while you work, invisible when you are finished.

You do not have to take our word for it, because a customer noticed the same trade independently and described both halves of it in one review — that the light printing can be difficult to see, and that on the plus side it means the numbers do not show through the paint. Another customer, painting a design with pale colors, remarked that the numbers were very easy to cover even with light shades.

So this is a design decision with a cost, not a printing fault. Knowing that is useful, because it means the answer is not to wish the print were darker. The answer is to see it better.

It also varies by design. Some of our designs draw comments about how clear the numbers are — one customer noted being able to read them without reading glasses at all. Others draw the opposite. Both sets of reviews are accurate. Darker designs and more detailed designs are consistently the harder ones to read, for the reasons in Chapter 4.

Fix one: light. Do this before anything else

Most difficulty that presents as "I cannot read the numbers" is a lighting problem wearing a disguise, and it is the cheapest thing to fix.

Three things matter, in order:

Direction. A lamp positioned low and to the side rakes light across the canvas surface. Because the printed lines sit slightly proud of the weave, raking light throws them into faint relief and makes them far easier to see than flat light does. Overhead lighting comes from the worst possible angle — straight down, filling in exactly the shadows that would help you.

Proximity. Light falls off fast. A lamp at eighteen inches from the canvas delivers dramatically more light to it than the same lamp across the room. Moving a light closer is free and it is usually enough on its own.

Color temperature. A cool or neutral white bulb, in the region of 4000 to 5000 kelvin, renders the printed gray lines with more contrast than a warm yellow bulb does. Warm light is pleasant to sit in and it is the wrong light for reading faint gray marks. It also subtly shifts how the paint colors look, which matters when you are trying to tell two similar shades apart.

An inexpensive adjustable desk lamp with a neutral bulb solves more of this problem than any other purchase you could make.

The glare problem, which light can also cause

There is a second lighting fault that looks like the first and needs the opposite fix.

If your lamp is positioned so that it reflects off the canvas straight back into your eyes, you get a bright veil across the surface that hides the printed lines completely. Wet paint is glossy and makes this worse, so it tends to appear once you have started rather than at setup.

You can tell the two apart easily. If the section looks dim, you need more light. If it looks washed-out and shiny, you need to **move the lamp further to the side** rather than brighter. Raking light from low and to one side gives you the relief effect without the reflection; light coming from in front of you and slightly above is the worst position for glare.

A quick test before you buy anything

Before spending money on lamps or magnifiers, do this. Take the canvas to a window in daylight, or hold any lamp you already own low and to one side, and look at the section you could not read.

If it becomes legible, your problem is light, and a fifteen-dollar adjustable lamp solves it permanently. If it is still illegible in good raking light, the section is genuinely too small or too faint, and magnification is the answer. Five seconds of testing tells you which of the next two sections you need.

Fix two: magnification

If light alone is not enough, magnification is the next step. Options, cheapest first:

Reading glasses a step stronger than your usual pair. If you already wear readers for close work, a slightly stronger pair used only for painting is the simplest answer and costs very little.

A sheet magnifier. A flat Fresnel lens the size of a page, laid over or propped above the canvas. Inexpensive, covers a wide area, and has no arms to get in the way.

Clip-on magnifying lenses that attach to whatever glasses you already wear, or a jeweler's loupe visor. These leave both hands free, which a handheld magnifier does not.

A magnifying lamp — a lens with a light ring around it on an adjustable arm. This is the most expensive option and it solves light and magnification together, which is why it is the one serious hobbyists tend to end up with.

One of our customers reported needing a magnifying glass in places on a particularly intricate design. That is a normal thing to need on a detailed canvas, not a sign that anything is wrong.

One option you already own. Photograph the section with your phone and zoom in on the picture. A phone camera resolves considerably more detail than the eye does at reading distance, and pinching to zoom on a still image is often enough to settle a number without any equipment at all. It also works

for the opposite problem — hold the phone at arm's length in camera mode to see how the whole painting reads from a distance, which is how it will actually be seen.

What we would avoid is holding a magnifying glass in one hand while painting with the other. It sounds workable and it is not: you need one hand for the brush and one resting on the table for stability. Anything you have to hold up is a tool you will stop using within an evening.

It gets easier as you go

Worth knowing, because the first hour is the worst it will be.

A numbered section is hardest to read when it is surrounded by bare canvas, because a faint gray line on off-white canvas is low contrast in every direction. Once the sections around it are painted, the unpainted area stands out as a clear light shape against finished color, and its boundary becomes obvious even where the printed line is barely visible.

This is another argument for the ordering in Chapter 7. Working outward through a region means each new section is bordered by paint on at least one side, which does much of the work of seeing it for you.

Fix three: use the printout properly

The 11 by 17 inch printout of the design in your kit is the answer to most unreadable numbers, and most people leave it in the bag.

When a number will not resolve, find the same region on the printout. The printed sheet shows the design at a size and a contrast the canvas cannot match, and in nearly every case the number you cannot read on the canvas is legible there. Keep it propped up beside the canvas rather than flat underneath it.

If a section genuinely has no number, which happens occasionally, the printout is also how you solve it. Look at what the surrounding sections are, and at the reference photo. A sliver between two areas of the same color is almost always that color. A gap in a run of shading follows the run.

Fix four: mark the canvas yourself

There is no rule against writing on your own canvas, and two habits help a great deal.

Pencil the number in larger. When you have worked out a faint number, write it in the section in ordinary pencil, larger and clearer. Graphite is covered completely by a single coat of acrylic.

Cross numbers off the printout as you finish them. On a design with a large palette this is how you keep track of where you are, and it turns a wall of numbers into a shrinking list.

When two colors look the same

This is a related problem and a real one — two greens, two yellows, or a black and a very dark brown that you cannot reliably tell apart in the pot. One of our customers reported exactly this.

The fix takes thirty seconds. **Paint a small swatch of each onto a scrap of paper**, label them with the pot numbers, and let them dry. Wet acrylic and dry acrylic are noticeably different in tone, and two colors that look identical wet often separate clearly once dry. Keep the labelled swatch sheet beside you for the whole project.

If close work is difficult for you

Do these four things and the problem largely disappears.

1. Choose the **16 by 20** size. The numbers are physically larger. See Chapter 2.
2. Get an **adjustable lamp with a neutral white bulb** and put it low and to the side.
3. Add **magnification** — a sheet magnifier is the cheapest useful option.
4. Keep the **11 by 17 printout** propped up beside you and pencil in numbers as you decode them.

Further reading: [Paint by Numbers Kits for Seniors: How to Choose One](#)

Where to start and why

There is no single correct order, and anyone who tells you there is has picked one priority and ignored the others. There are three sensible ways to order the work, each of which optimizes something different and costs you something else.

This chapter explains all three, then tells you which combination we would actually use.

Our own general advice, and its limit

The guidance on our product pages is to **start with the largest areas and work down to the smallest**. That is good advice and it is the right default, for three reasons: the big areas are where the picture starts to appear, which is motivating; they are forgiving of a hand still finding its rhythm; and they teach you how this particular set of paints behaves before you attempt anything delicate.

Its limit is that "largest first" says nothing about *where* on the canvas to work, or in what color order. That is where the three orderings come in.

Ordering one: by region

Work across the canvas in a deliberate direction — conventionally top to bottom, and background before foreground.

What it optimizes: not resting your hand in wet paint. This is the single most common way people damage work they have already done. Working top to bottom means your hand is always over canvas you have not painted yet.

What it costs: you change colors constantly. A single region may use fifteen different numbers, so you are opening pots, rinsing brushes and hunting for numbers all the way through.

Background before foreground matters for a second reason. Where two areas meet, whichever you paint second can slightly overlap the first, and you want the foreground object to have the crisp edge. A tree painted over a finished sky reads correctly; a sky painted up against a finished tree tends to nibble at its outline.

Ordering two: by color

Paint every section of number one, then every section of number two, and so on.

What it optimizes: efficiency. One pot open, one brush loaded, no rinsing between sections. It is meaningfully faster, it wastes far less paint, and it keeps pots closed and moist. On a design with a large palette this is a real advantage.

What it costs: your hand travels all over the canvas, including across areas you painted twenty minutes ago. Acrylic is touch-dry quickly, so this is manageable — but it is exactly how smudges happen. It also makes progress feel slower for the first half, because the painting stays patchy for a long time before it suddenly comes together.

Ordering three: by tone

Work from the darkest colors to the lightest, or the reverse.

Dark first has two arguments for it. The dark areas usually define the composition, so the picture becomes legible early. And a mistake made in a dark area can be covered by a lighter color far less easily than the other way round, so doing the unforgiving work first is sensible.

Light first has one strong argument. Light paint over a dark printed line, or over a dark neighboring color that has bled slightly, is the situation most likely to need two coats. Doing pale colors while everything around them is still clean canvas avoids it.

What it costs either way: tone order ignores geography completely, so it has the same wet-paint problem as color order, more so.

The drying problem nobody mentions

Here is the practical constraint that decides more of your painting order than any principle above, and most guides skip it.

Two sections that share a border should not be painted wet, one straight after the other. Wet paint meeting wet paint at a boundary bleeds across it, and the crisp printed edge you were being careful about disappears into a soft join. This is the mechanism behind most disappointing edges.

Acrylic in a thin coat is touch-dry in ten to twenty minutes, so the fix is simply not to wait around. **Paint a section, then move to a non-adjacent section while the first sets.** By the time you have done three or four elsewhere, the first is ready to have its neighbor painted against it.

This is why a strict color order works better in practice than it sounds. If number four appears in six places scattered across the canvas, painting all six in turn gives every one of them drying time before its neighbors arrive, and you never stand still. It is also why painting one small region to completion, section by adjacent section, is the slowest and least crisp way to work despite feeling like the most organized.

A worked example

Take a landscape design — a lake, a treeline, a cabin, flowers in the foreground. This is roughly the order we would use, and it shows the hybrid in action.

First, a test section: a patch of mid-tone water at the very bottom edge, where the flowers will later overlap it anyway.

Then the sky, largest brush, working top to bottom. If the sky uses three graded blues, do all of each blue in turn, working the boundaries between them last once each band has set.

Then the water, which is the other large mass. Same approach.

Then the treeline, painted over the finished sky, so the trees get the crisp edge and the sky does not have to be picked around.

Then the cabin, which sits in front of the trees for the same reason.

Then the flowers, which are in front of everything.

Last, the fine work — window frames, the light in the cabin, the individual flower centers, any sliver too narrow for the small brush. Everything around them is finished, so there is no risk of disturbing wet paint and every edge is already defined.

Notice that this is background-to-foreground at the large scale, color-grouped within each mass, and detail-last throughout. That is the hybrid, and it falls out naturally once you are avoiding wet edges.

What we would actually do

A hybrid, which is what most experienced painters converge on without being told:

- 1 **Do a test section first.** Pick a small area of a mid-tone color somewhere inconspicuous — a corner, an edge, something that will be behind an object. Paint it. This tells you how thick the paint is, how well it covers, and how the brush behaves, and it does so somewhere that will not bother you if it goes badly. Ten minutes well spent.
- 2 **Work the background first,** top to bottom, in whatever color order the background needs.
- 3 **Then work forward through the middle ground and foreground,** region by region, still roughly top to bottom.
- 4 **Within any one region, group by color.** If a region uses number four in six places, do all six. This is the compromise that gets you most of the efficiency of color ordering without the hand-across-wet-paint problem.
- 5 **Do the densest, fiddliest region early in a sitting,** not at the end of one. Precision fails with fatigue faster than patience does. Chapter 4 has more on this.
- 6 **Leave the finest lines and the smallest slivers until last.** They are quick once everything around them is done, and they are the strokes that make the finished painting look sharp.

When you lose your place

On a design with a large palette this happens to everyone, usually after a gap of a week or two. You sit down and cannot tell which sections are finished and which are bare canvas of a similar tone.

Three ways out, in order of how well they work:

Cross numbers off the printout as you complete them.

Prevention, and it takes no effort. Once a number is fully done everywhere, strike it through. What remains is your list.

Look for the printed number. A painted section has no visible number; a bare one does, even if faintly. If you can see a digit, that section is not done.

Look at it in raking light. Painted acrylic sits slightly above the canvas and has a different sheen from bare primed canvas. A lamp low to one side makes finished and unfinished areas separate clearly, even where the colors are close.

If you are genuinely stuck, the reference photo tells you what the area is meant to be, and the printout tells you which numbers live there. Between them you can always reconstruct where you were.

Before you stop for the evening

Four things, and they take two minutes:

Close every lid properly. The single biggest cause of paint drying out is a lid left half on.

Rinse your brushes and reshape the tips with your fingers before laying them flat. Chapter 8 explains why this matters more than it sounds.

Note where you were. Mark the printout, or leave the pot you were using standing apart from the others. Coming back three evenings later and not knowing which number you were on is a genuine irritation.

Look at it from across the room before you put the light out. This is not sentiment. The flat areas of color blend at distance, and it is the only way to see what you have actually made. It is also the thing that gets you back to the table tomorrow.

Further reading: [Paint by Numbers Tips That Actually Work](#)

CHAPTER 8

Brushwork for numbered sections

Brush control is the only real skill in paint by numbers, and it is a smaller skill than it sounds. There are three strokes, and the whole of the rest of this chapter is about how much paint to put on the brush.

What is in the box, honestly

Every stock kit contains **four brushes with wooden handles**, in different sizes.

Since we are asking you to trust this guide, here is the actual picture from our own reviews rather than a claim. Of nineteen reviews that mention the brushes, eleven are positive — several specifically saying they hold their shape well, and one noting they are considerably better than the plastic-handled brushes that come with cheaper kits. Five are critical, and what is interesting is that **all five say the same thing**: the brushes handle larger areas fine, and are not the right tool for the finest detail. One customer noted a brush shedding a hair mid-painting.

So the honest summary is this. **The four brushes are good for most of a design and are not the right tool for the very smallest sections.** If your design has a lot of fine detail, one extra brush solves it, and that is covered below.

The four brushes and what each is for

Sizes vary slightly, but the set covers four jobs:

- **The largest** is for skies, water, walls, and any broad mass. Use it for as much as you can — big areas painted with a big brush look smoother, because fewer strokes means fewer visible edges.
- **The medium** is the workhorse. Most sections on a canvas are medium sections.
- **The small** is for tight areas and for edging, described below.
- **The finest** is for lines, slivers and the smallest numbered areas.

Match the brush to the section rather than trying to do everything with one. Using too small a brush on a large area is the most common cause of a patchy, streaky-looking fill.

Loading the brush

This is the whole skill, so it gets its own section.

Dip only the tip third of the bristles. Paint should not reach the metal collar. Paint that gets up into the collar dries there, spreads the bristles permanently, and is what ruins a brush.

Then take some off. Touch the loaded brush against the rim of the pot or a paper towel. A brush carrying too much paint deposits a bead that runs over the printed line, and it is the single most common cause of going outside the lines. A brush carrying too little drags and streaks.

The right amount is a brush that is visibly wet but holds its point. You will find it within about five minutes and then never think about it again.

How to hold it

Two adjustments, and together they do more for accuracy than any amount of practice.

Hold the brush close to the bristles, not at the end of the handle like a pen you are writing with at speed. The nearer your fingers are to the tip, the less any movement of your hand is magnified at the point where paint meets canvas. For fine work, choke right up to the collar.

Rest your hand. The heel of your palm, your little finger, your forearm — something must be in contact with the table or the canvas edge. A hand held in mid-air has a tremor that nobody can suppress by concentrating, and every unsupported stroke inherits it. This is why sitting at the right height, from Chapter 5, is not a comfort detail.

For long strokes, move your whole forearm from the elbow rather than flexing your fingers. Fingers produce short arcs; the

forearm produces the long straight pull you want along a border.

The three strokes

The fill. For anything larger than a fingernail. Lay the paint on in a few overlapping strokes in one direction, then leave it alone. Acrylic does not want to be worked; brushing over a fill as it starts to set is what produces visible streaks.

The edge. For the boundary of a section. Load lightly, hold the brush so the tip is doing the work, and draw along just inside the printed line. The trick is that you are aiming inside the line, not at it.

The line. For slivers and printed details narrower than the brush. Draw, do not push. Pull the brush along its length so the tip trails behind the direction of travel, which keeps the stroke narrow and even.

Edge first, then fill

This is the technique that makes finished sections look clean, and almost nobody does it instinctively.

For any section of reasonable size: **edge the whole outline first with a small brush, then fill the middle with a bigger one.** Painting the boundary deliberately, in control, with a lightly loaded small brush is far more accurate than arriving at the boundary at speed on the end of a fill stroke. Once the edge is laid down, the fill has a margin of error, because it only has to

meet paint you have already placed.

It feels slower. It is not, because it removes almost all of the tidying up.

When you go over a line

You will, and it is fine.

Wait. The instinct is to wipe it immediately, which smears wet paint across two sections and turns a small problem into a larger one. Let it dry — a few minutes is enough.

Then simply paint the neighboring section normally when you get to it. Acrylic is opaque and covers its neighbors readily. Ninety percent of over-the-line mistakes disappear on their own when the adjacent color goes on.

For the remaining ten percent, where a dark color has run into a pale area you have already finished, wait for it to dry fully and put a second coat of the pale color over it. This is normal and Chapter 9 goes into coverage properly.

Paint that is too thick

Acrylic in a sealed pot is thicker than acrylic on a palette, and some pots are thicker than others. One of our customers said plainly that the paint is thick and needs thinning down, and another painting a design full of fine lines offered the shortest useful advice in the whole review corpus: keep your paint thin.

They are right, with one caveat.

Add water one drop at a time, and mix it in the lid or on a scrap of foil rather than in the pot. A drop is genuinely enough to change the consistency. Thinned paint flows off the brush, holds a narrower line and does not leave ridges.

The caveat is coverage. Thinned acrylic is more transparent, so it may need a second coat to hide the printed number underneath. That is a fair trade for fine work and a bad trade for a large flat area, where thick paint straight from the pot covers in one pass. So thin for detail, and do not thin for skies.

Never thin the whole pot. You cannot undo it, and you will want the thick paint later.

The finest detail

If your design has slivers narrower than the smallest brush in the box, add one brush: a **size 10/0 or 20/0 liner** from any craft shop. They cost very little.

There is a second trick worth knowing, from a customer describing how a particularly intricate design was painted here: **a pin or the point of a toothpick** can be used to keep a very fine printed line open when paint from either side wants to close over it, and to lift a stray bristle out of wet paint. It is a genuinely useful tool for detailed canvases.

Looking after the brushes

Brushes fail from neglect rather than use, and the failure mode our customers report — a brush shedding hairs — is usually the result of paint drying in the collar.

Between colors: rinse in the first water pot, finish in the second, and squeeze the bristles gently in a paper towel.

At the end of a session: rinse until the water runs clear, reshape the tip to a point with your fingers, and lay the brush **flat**. Never leave a brush standing bristles-down in water — it bends the tip permanently within a couple of hours and that brush will never draw a clean line again.

Never let paint dry in the brush. If it does, warm water and patience will recover a brush that has been left an hour. Nothing will recover one left overnight.

If a brush sheds a hair into wet paint

One of our customers had exactly this happen and got the hair off successfully, which is the normal outcome. The method matters though.

Do not wipe it. Lift it. Use the point of a pin or a toothpick and pick the hair straight up and away from the surface. Dragging it sideways plows a channel through the paint and takes more repairing than the hair ever would have.

If the paint has already set around it, leave it until dry, then lift it and touch in the small mark left behind with the same color.

New brushes shed a few loose bristles in their first session as a matter of course. Flicking a new brush firmly between your fingers before its first use dislodges most of them before they reach the canvas.

When to replace a brush

A brush is finished when it will no longer come to a point after you reshape it wet, or when the bristles have splayed permanently at the collar. Both are caused by paint drying inside the collar, which is why the rinse-and-reshape habit is the whole of brush care.

The finest brush is the one that goes first, because it has the least material in it and does the most demanding work. If your design has a lot of detail, expect the smallest brush to wear before you finish, and treat a replacement liner as a normal running cost rather than a fault.

Further reading: [Paint by Number Brush Types and How to Use Them](#) · [How to Clean Paintbrushes Without Ruining Them](#)

CHAPTER 9

Coverage, and when a second coat is the answer

Somewhere in your first evening a color will go on and you will still be able to see the printed number through it. This chapter is about what that means, which is usually less than people fear.

Why coverage varies between colors

Not all paint is equally opaque, and this is a property of the pigment rather than a matter of quality.

Whites, blacks, earth tones and most mid-tone greens and blues are naturally opaque. They cover in a single pass. Some yellows, bright reds and oranges are naturally more transparent — the pigments that produce those colors simply let more light through. A transparent yellow over a printed number will show that number after one coat no matter whose paint it is.

Our own customers report this from both directions, and both are accurate. One found that some paints did not cover the numbers well. Another, painting a design with pale colors, said the numbers were very easy to cover even with light shades. They were painting different colors on different designs.

So the first useful thing to know is that needing a second coat on two or three colors out of twenty-four is normal and expected, not a defect.

Wait before you judge it

This is the most common mistake in this chapter. Acrylic looks considerably more transparent wet than it does dry.

Wet acrylic contains water and an emulsified binder that is milky rather than clear. As it dries, the water leaves and the binder goes transparent, which brings the pigment forward and the color becomes both darker and more opaque than it looked going on. A section that seems worryingly thin at the moment you paint it will often be perfectly solid twenty minutes later.

So the rule is simple. **Paint the section, leave it, and look again when it is dry.** Do not put a second coat onto wet paint that you have decided is too thin, because you will be adding paint that is not needed and lifting the first coat while you do it.

When a second coat genuinely is the answer

Once dry, apply another coat if any of these are true:

- **The printed number or line is still visible** through the color.
- **The finish is patchy** — some areas denser than others, usually because the first coat was applied with too little paint or brushed until it started to set.

- **You thinned the paint** for fine work. Thinned acrylic is more transparent by definition, so detail sections often need two passes. Chapter 8 covers that trade.
- **A darker neighboring color bled slightly** into a pale section before it dried.

Apply the second coat exactly as you did the first: fully dry underneath, brush loaded properly, laid on in a few strokes and then left alone. Do not scrub at it. A second coat brushed back and forth into a first coat will lift the first coat and leave you worse off than before.

One customer summarized the whole business in a sentence, saying that you may need to do a few coats and that it takes time but comes out well. That is the honest expectation.

When a second coat is not the answer

When it is still wet. See above. Wait.

When the real problem is the paint consistency. If a color is going on thin and streaky everywhere rather than just over the numbers, the paint may be over-thinned or the brush under-loaded. Fix the cause. Chapter 10 covers consistency.

When you are trying to hide a mistake in a different color. Covering a dark color with a pale one takes several coats and often still shows a ghost. It is usually better to let the dark area dry completely and then cover it with the pale color applied thickly, straight from the pot, rather than building up three thin

coats.

Hairline gaps between sections

This is the other coverage problem, and it is more noticeable in a finished painting than a faint number ever is.

Where two sections meet, a thin line of bare canvas is often left showing — each color stopped just short of the printed line, and the line itself, plus a hair's width either side, never got painted. Individually it is invisible. Across a whole canvas, particularly in a busy area, it reads as a white web running through the picture and it flattens the whole thing.

Two fixes, depending on when you notice.

While painting: aim to cover the printed line rather than to stop at it. The line is a guide, not a boundary to be preserved. Whichever section you paint second should slightly overlap the first, so the two colors meet with no canvas between them. This is why edging deliberately with a small brush, from Chapter 8, produces better results than filling up to a line at speed.

Afterwards: go around with the finest brush and the darker of the two adjacent colors, and draw along the gap. Use the darker color because a slightly thick dark line reads as a deliberate outline, while a slightly thick light line reads as a mistake. This is the single most effective finishing pass you can make, and it takes half an hour on a canvas that has otherwise taken forty.

Streaks and brush marks

Streaks — visible bands of thicker and thinner paint within one section — nearly always come from brushing paint that has begun to set. Acrylic starts to grab within a minute or two. Lay it on and leave it; if you go back to even it out after that window, you drag the setting film into ridges. If a section has streaked, let it dry completely and put a second coat on in one pass.

Visible brush texture is a different thing and it is not a fault. A little directional texture looks like a painting. It is worth deciding deliberately: in skies and water, brush in the direction the eye travels — horizontally across water, following the sweep of a sky — and the texture reinforces the picture instead of fighting it.

What good coverage actually looks like

Hold the dry canvas at an angle to a lamp so light rakes across it. You are looking for three things:

- **No printed number or line visible** through any color.
- **An even film**, with no thin patches where the canvas weave shows through more in one place than another.
- **A consistent surface** within each section, with any texture running in one direction.

If all three are true, the section is done. Resist adding another coat to a section that already passes, because each additional layer builds thickness at the edges and eventually those edges

become visible ridges.

The number that will not disappear

Occasionally a number sits under a transparent color and remains faintly visible even after two coats. Three options, in order:

Let it dry completely and add a third coat straight from the pot, unthinned. Full-strength acrylic is the most opaque form of the paint you have.

Put a coat of an adjacent opaque color underneath first, if the section borders one. A thin undercoat of an opaque neighbor, fully dried, then the transparent color over it, will hide anything. This is what painters do and it takes one extra step.

Leave it. This is a serious suggestion. A faint number in a small section is visible at reading distance and invisible at the distance the painting will actually be seen from. Before doing surgery on a section, stand back across the room and look. Most of the time the answer is that it has already disappeared.

Further reading: [Paint by Numbers Tips That Actually Work](#) · [Paint by Numbers: Oil or Acrylic?](#)

Paint that thickens

Acrylic paint is pigment held in a water-based binder, and it hardens by losing water rather than by any chemical reaction with air. Everything in this chapter follows from that single fact.

Once water starts leaving a pot, the paint thickens. Left long enough, it sets into a solid that no amount of water will bring back, because what has happened is not drying in the reversible sense — the binder has coalesced permanently.

Knowing where a pot sits on that path tells you exactly what to do about it.

The honest position on how your paints arrive

Our paints are supplied in sealed pots so they arrive moist, and most customers find them ready to use. Some do not. Several of our own reviews describe pots that were already beginning to dry, or semi-dry before they were opened, and one described paint thick enough to need thinning from the start.

We would rather state that than have you discover it and wonder whether something is wrong with your kit. In nearly every case a pot in that condition is entirely usable and needs

nothing more than a few drops of water and a stir. The rest of this chapter is how.

The three states, and what each needs

Thick but stirrable. The paint is stiff, drags on the brush and leaves ridges, but a stir shows it is uniform underneath. This is the common case and it is easily fixed. Add water, below.

Skinned over. A rubbery film has formed on the surface with liquid paint beneath. Lift the skin off in one piece with the point of a toothpick or a pin and discard it. Do not stir it in — it will not redissolve and it will leave lumps that drag through every stroke. What is underneath is usually fine.

Solid through. The pot has set into a rubbery or hard block. If a firm push with a toothpick does not go in, it is finished. Water will not recover it; at best you get a gritty slurry that will not adhere properly. This is the point at which you want a replacement, which is Chapter 11.

The one-drop rule

Add water one drop at a time, stir thoroughly, and reassess.

This sounds fussy and it is the difference between rescuing a pot and ruining it. A paint pot holds a small volume, and what looks like a modest splash of water can double the liquid content. The change happens faster than you expect and it cannot be undone.

Use the tip of a brush, a toothpick or an eyedropper. Stir properly — right down to the bottom of the pot, where the pigment settles — and give it a moment before deciding it needs more.

One of our customers, painting a design full of fine lines, offered the shortest useful advice in our entire review corpus: keep your paint thin. They are right for detail work, with the coverage caveat from Chapter 9.

Why over-thinning is worse than thick paint

This is the part that is rarely explained, and it is the reason for the one-drop rule.

The binder is what makes acrylic stick to the canvas and stay flexible. There is a fixed amount of it in the pot. Adding water dilutes the binder along with the pigment, and past a certain point there is no longer enough binder to hold the pigment together or bond it to the canvas.

Paint in that state looks thin and watery going on, dries chalky and dull rather than solid, sits on the surface rather than in it, and can be rubbed off with a fingertip. It is also nearly impossible to correct, because adding more paint to over-thinned paint just gives you a larger quantity of over-thinned paint.

Thick paint is an inconvenience. Over-thinned paint is a ruined section. Err toward thick.

Never add anything but water. No solvents, no oil, no household cleaners, no alcohol. Acrylic is water-based, and anything else will break the emulsion.

Preventing it, which is mostly one habit

Close the lid. That is genuinely the whole of it.

An open pot in a warm room loses usable consistency in under an hour. The single biggest cause of a kit drying out is not time in storage but a set of lids left off across a long afternoon. Work with one pot open. Close it before you open the next.

Two supporting habits. **Do not thin the whole pot** — mix the water into a small amount on a scrap of foil or in the lid, so the reservoir stays at full strength for the broad areas that want it. And **wipe the rim before closing**, because dried paint on the rim stops the lid seating and a lid that is not quite closed is the same as no lid at all.

The room matters more than you would think

Working time is set by how fast water leaves the paint, so the conditions in the room change it substantially.

Warm, dry or moving air shortens it — a radiator under the table, a sunny window, a fan or an air conditioning vent blowing across the canvas. Paint that behaved normally last week can start setting on the brush in a heated room in winter.

Cool and slightly humid lengthens it, which is why paint often feels easier to work with on a damp day. This is also why a cured painting takes longer to harden in a cold room, from Chapter 12.

If your paint is setting faster than you can use it, move the canvas away from the heat source before you start adding water. Changing where you sit is free and does not risk over-thinning.

A stay-wet trick for long sessions

If you decant paint to thin it, it will skin over on foil within twenty minutes or so. There is a simple fix used by acrylic painters.

Line a shallow dish or a food container with a few sheets of damp — not wet — paper towel, and lay a piece of baking parchment or foil on top. Put your decanted paint on that. The moisture underneath keeps the air immediately above it humid and the paint stays workable for hours rather than minutes. Put the lid on between sittings and it will still be usable the next evening.

This costs nothing and it is the difference between decanting once and decanting six times.

If you have to stop in the middle of a section

Try not to, because the join will show. A section painted in two halves an hour apart can leave a visible seam where the second half went on over a dried edge.

If you must stop, **stop at a natural boundary** — the edge of the section, or where it passes behind an object — rather than in open space. If you are caught out mid-area, feather the wet edge as thin as you can with an almost-dry brush so there is no ridge for the next application to butt against, and plan to give that section a full second coat rather than trying to match a join.

Longer gaps between sittings

If you are putting the kit away for weeks rather than days, press each lid down firmly, keep the pots upright, and store them somewhere cool and out of direct sun. Warmth and light both accelerate water loss. A drawer is better than a windowsill.

If a pot has thickened after a long gap, work through the three states above before assuming it is lost. Most recover.

Further reading: [How to Deal with Dry or Hardened Paint in Your Kit](#) · [Slow Dry Acrylic Paint: How to Buy More Working Time](#)

When you run out of a color

This chapter is short and it has a clean answer, which is unusual and worth saying up front: **every one of our designs has a matching replacement paint set**, containing the same numbered colors mixed for that specific design.

The rest of the chapter is when you need one and how to avoid needing one.

It does happen, in both directions

Our reviews report both experiences. One customer found there was not enough paint in a particular number. Another said there was more than enough paint for every number and wished we made more designs. Both are true, because how far a pot goes depends on things that vary by painter as much as by kit.

The usual causes, in order of how often they come up:

Second coats. A color that needs two passes uses roughly twice the paint. If two or three of your colors are the transparent kind from Chapter 9, they will run down faster than the rest.

Over-thinning, then compensating. Thinned paint covers less, so you apply more of it, and the pot empties while you are still on the first coat.

Drying out. By far the most common. The paint was not used up; it hardened in the pot. Chapter 10 is the prevention.

Spills, and loading too heavily. A brush dipped to the collar carries far more paint than it delivers, and most of it goes into the rinse water.

First, check that you have actually run out

Two things worth doing before concluding a pot is empty.

Look at the bottom. Pigment settles and the heaviest colors compact into a layer that can look like an empty pot when it is actually a stiff reserve. A stir with a toothpick and a drop of water frequently produces another section's worth.

Check for a skin. A pot that appears empty sometimes has a rubbery film sitting over usable paint. Lift it off and look underneath.

Making what you have go further

If you are close to the end of a color and want to finish the section:

Edge first, then fill, from Chapter 8. It uses noticeably less paint than filling and then tidying the boundary.

Thin slightly, and accept a second coat. Two thin coats use less paint than one heavy one, because a heavy coat leaves ridges that are wasted material.

Do the visible areas first. If a color appears in a prominent foreground object and in a small patch behind something else, paint the prominent one at full strength while you have the paint.

What to do the moment you notice

If a pot runs dry halfway through a section, the immediate decision matters more than the replacement does.

Do not leave a hard wet edge in open space. A section abandoned mid-fill dries with a ridge, and when you come back with fresh paint weeks later that ridge shows as a line through the middle of an otherwise flat area.

Instead, **feather what you have left** — spread the remaining paint thin with an almost-dry brush so it fades out rather than stopping abruptly — and accept that the section will need a full coat over the top when the replacement arrives. A thin, feathered underlayer disappears completely under a proper second coat. A ridge does not.

If the color appears in several places and you have a little left, finish the **smallest** areas completely rather than starting the largest. A finished small section needs nothing later; a half-finished large one needs careful matching.

Keep the leftovers

When the painting is done, do not throw the pots away.

Seal what is left and keep it with the finished canvas, or somewhere you will find it. The reason is touch-ups. A painting that gets knocked in a move, scuffed while being mounted, or marked while hanging can be repaired invisibly with the original color, and only with the original color.

What is not worth keeping them for is the next canvas. The colors were mixed for this design and the numbering restarts on every kit, so number seven from one design is not number seven from another. Leftovers are touch-up paint for this painting, not a starter palette for the next one.

The replacement set

If a color is genuinely gone, hardened, or was missing from your kit, the matching set is the answer.

We make one for every design in the range. It is the same set of numbered colors, mixed to the same formulas as the ones in your kit, so the replacement for number seven is the same number seven. That is the important part, and it is why this is worth doing properly.

Extra Paint sets — one for every design

Find your design by name. The set contains the full range of colors for that canvas.

Why a matching set beats a craft-shop substitute. The colors in a paint by numbers kit are not standard tube colors. They were mixed specifically for that design, and the design was separated into those exact shades. A green from a craft shop that looks identical in the pot will almost never be identical on the canvas, and because it sits next to sections of the original green, the difference reads as a patch rather than as a color. This is the one place where close enough is not close enough. If you have already finished neighboring sections in the original color, use the matching set.

If a pot was missing from your kit, that is a different situation and it is ours to fix rather than yours to buy. Contact us. Our reviews include customers who were missing paint or brushes and had replacements sent out, in one case within days of getting in touch. Email [**support@ledgebay.com**](mailto:support@ledgebay.com) and tell us the design and the number.

Buying ahead

Worth considering at the time you order the kit rather than three weeks in:

If your design is **dark, highly detailed, or heavy on one dominant color**, the odds of running a particular number down are higher — a sky that occupies half the canvas uses a great deal of one blue. Adding the matching set to the same order costs one shipment rather than two, and it removes the possibility of

stopping mid-project.

For custom canvases made from your own photo, this works differently. Extra paint is offered as an option at the time you order, where you can add one or two full extra sets to the kit. Because a custom canvas is mixed for your individual photograph, that is the moment to decide. See Chapter 14.

Where to look: [Extra Paint sets](#) · [Custom Paint by Numbers](#)

Sealing, framing and hanging

You have finished. This chapter is about the three decisions that turn a painted canvas into something on a wall, and the first of them is simply to wait.

Dry is not the same as cured

Touch-dry happens in ten to twenty minutes for a normal coat. The surface no longer transfers to a finger.

Cured takes considerably longer. The binder continues to coalesce and harden for days after the water has gone — commonly two to three weeks to full hardness for ordinary coats, longer where the paint went on thickly or the room is cool and humid.

The distinction matters for exactly one reason: **do not varnish a painting that is not cured**. Sealing a canvas that is still releasing water traps moisture under the varnish, which can cloud it, leave it permanently tacky, or lift the paint. If you are going to varnish, wait. A week is a reasonable minimum for a thin, evenly painted canvas, and two is safer.

You can frame and hang it long before that. It is only sealing that needs the wait.

Do you need to varnish it at all

Honestly, no. A finished acrylic painting hung indoors and left alone will be fine for many years unvarnished. Plenty of people never do it.

What varnish actually gives you is three things:

An even sheen. This is the strongest argument and the one people do not anticipate. Different pigments dry to different finishes — some matte, some slightly glossy — so a finished canvas often has a patchy quality in raking light, where one blue looks flat next to a neighboring green that looks satin. A single varnish coat unifies all of it into one consistent surface, and the improvement is usually more visible than people expect.

Protection. A removable barrier against dust, fingerprints and cleaning. Dust settles into bare acrylic and cannot be washed off without damaging the paint; on a varnished surface it wipes away.

Some protection from light. Many varnishes include ultraviolet inhibitors that slow fading, which matters if the painting will hang anywhere near daylight.

What it costs you is an hour, a small outlay, and a decision that is difficult to reverse. **We do not sell varnish** — any acrylic varnish from a craft or art shop is what you want.

Choosing a sheen

Three options, and the choice is aesthetic rather than technical.

Matte keeps the flat, chalky look many people prefer on landscapes, and it kills reflections completely, which makes a painting readable on a wall opposite a window. It slightly mutes the darkest colors.

Satin is the middle option and the safe default. It evens the surface without making it shiny and keeps the darks looking rich.

Gloss deepens colors noticeably and makes them look wet and saturated. It also reflects every light source in the room, so it demands careful placement.

If you are unsure, choose satin. If the painting is going somewhere bright, choose matte.

How to varnish, in six steps

- 1 **Wait for it to cure**, as above.
- 2 **Work somewhere clean, dust-free and not humid.** Dust settling into wet varnish is permanent, and humidity is the most common cause of a cloudy finish.
- 3 **Lay the canvas flat**, not upright. Flat prevents runs, which are the other common failure.
- 4 **Remove dust first** with a soft dry brush or a lint-free cloth. Never with a damp cloth.

- 5 **Apply thin, even coats in one direction.** Two thin coats are far better than one thick one. A thick coat pools in the texture and dries unevenly.
- 6 **Let each coat dry fully before the next,** and do not go back over an area that has started to set. Brushing into setting varnish leaves streaks that cannot be fixed.

Spray varnish is more forgiving of brush marks and less forgiving of everything else — it needs ventilation, several very light passes rather than one wet one, and a windless space. Brush-on is the safer choice indoors for most people.

Test first on the edge of the canvas or on a scrap you painted during setup. Sheen is a matter of taste and it is easier to discover it on a corner than across the whole sky.

Further reading: [Do You Need to Varnish an Acrylic Painting? · The Best Varnish for Acrylic Paintings](#)

Signing it

People hesitate over this and then regret not doing it, so here is the case for.

You did not compose the picture, and that is the usual reason for hesitating. But you did make this object, over a number of evenings, and in twenty years the thing that will matter about it is who painted it and when — particularly if it ends up with a family member. A date in the corner is worth more later than it costs now.

Where. Bottom right is conventional, bottom left is fine. Keep it inside the image area rather than on the very edge, where a frame or a mount may cover it.

With what. The finest brush from the kit and one of the darker colors already in the painting, thinned slightly so it flows. Using a color from the palette makes it look like part of the work. A permanent fine-liner pen also works, but test it on a scrap first — some inks bleed on acrylic and some lift when varnished.

When. After the paint is dry and **before** you varnish, so the signature sits under the protective layer rather than on top of it.

Initials and a year are enough. If it was a gift, or was painted through a particular period, a few words on the back in pencil are worth more than anything on the front.

Photographing it

Worth doing properly, because a photograph is how the painting gets shared and it is usually done badly.

Light it evenly and indirectly. Daylight from a window, with the canvas turned so the light falls across it rather than bouncing straight back. Overhead room lights produce a hotspot in the middle and dark corners.

Avoid flash entirely. It reflects off the paint, blows out the highlights and flattens every color in the picture.

Shoot square on. Hold the camera parallel to the canvas, centered, not at an angle from above. Tilting produces a trapezoid that no amount of editing fully corrects.

Fill the frame with the painting and crop to the edges afterwards.

Wait for varnish to dry if you have varnished, and shoot a matte-varnished or unvarnished canvas in preference to a glossy one. Gloss reflects the room.

If it came out well, we would genuinely like to see it. Finished paintings from customers are collected at the [customer gallery](#), which is worth looking at before you start your next one — seeing the same design finished by six different people is the best argument there is that the canvas is only half of it.

Framing

If you bought a framed kit, there is nothing to do. The canvas is already stretched on its wooden frame, the edges are finished, and it is ready to hang or to stand on the easel it came with. Skip to the next section.

If you bought an unframed canvas, read Chapter 3 before you buy a frame. The short version, which is important enough to repeat: our unframed canvases are trimmed close to the printed image and there is not enough margin to stretch one over stretcher bars afterwards. Four separate customers have described running into exactly that, one of them measuring the

canvas at about a quarter of an inch under a standard 16 by 20 frame.

The three approaches that do work, covered in detail in Chapter 3:

- **Mount it on a rigid board** with spray adhesive. Cheapest and most reliable.
- **Use a frame with a mat**, which overlaps and hides the trimmed edge. No adhesive needed.
- **Glue it to a pre-stretched blank canvas** from an art shop, giving a finished edge and a stretched appearance.

Both of our canvas sizes are standard US frame sizes, so off-the-shelf frames are easy to find.

Further reading: [How to Frame a Paint by Number Canvas](#) · [Frame or Mount? Finishing an Unframed Canvas](#) · [Stretching Frames and Stretcher Bars, Explained](#)

Hanging it

Height. The standard used by galleries is to put the center of the picture at about 57 to 60 inches from the floor, which is average eye level. The most common domestic mistake by a wide margin is hanging too high. If the painting is going above furniture, leave roughly six to eight inches between the top of the furniture and the bottom of the frame so the two read as a group rather than as two separate things.

Light. Keep it out of direct sunlight. Ultraviolet fades pigments over years, and the colors that go first are the reds and yellows, which is precisely what makes a landscape look wrong as it ages. A wall that receives bright indirect light is ideal. If you must hang it opposite a window, a matte varnish will stop the reflection.

Humidity and heat. Avoid bathrooms, and avoid directly above a radiator, a stove or a fireplace. Canvas expands and contracts with humidity, and repeated cycling loosens a stretched canvas and can craze paint over time.

Hardware. These are light objects — a framed 16 by 20 canvas weighs very little — so a single picture hook rated well above the weight is sufficient in most walls. Use two hooks spaced apart rather than one if you want it to stay level, which is the practical fix for a picture that persistently tilts.

Hanging more than one

Most people who finish one of these finish another, and two or three paintings on a wall are a different problem from one.

Matching sizes are easiest. Two 16 by 20 canvases hung side by side with a consistent gap — four to six inches works well — read as a deliberate pair. Mixed sizes need more thought.

Align a common edge. For a row, line up the centers horizontally. For a mixed group, pick either a common top line or a common bottom line and hold it; a group that aligns on

nothing looks accidental.

Treat the group as one shape. The 57-to-60-inch rule applies to the center of the whole arrangement, not to each piece. Lay the group out on the floor first and adjust it there, which takes five minutes and saves a wall full of holes.

Designs from the same range tend to sit together well, because they were painted by artists working in a comparable style and printed at the same sizes.

If you are not going to hang it

Some paintings are made for someone else, and some are simply made.

If it is a gift, leave it unvarnished unless you know the recipient's preference, and let them choose the frame. A finished unframed canvas travels flat between two sheets of card far more safely than a framed one travels at all.

If you are storing it, keep it flat rather than rolled. A finished acrylic painting should not be re-rolled — the paint film is flexible but it is not designed to be bent back on itself, and rolling a cured canvas can craze the surface. Store it flat, face up, somewhere dry and out of direct sun, with a sheet of paper over the face.

If it is on a stretched frame, stand it upright rather than laying it face down, and keep anything from pressing against the canvas, which will leave a permanent impression.

Living with it

Dust it with a dry, soft brush or a clean microfiber cloth, gently, every few months. Never use a damp cloth on unvarnished acrylic and never use any household cleaning product on a painting at all, varnished or not.

Rotate it out of bright rooms if you have somewhere else to put it, or simply accept slow change as normal. Every painting in every house is doing this.

And stand back and look at it occasionally from across the room. That is the distance the flat areas of color resolve at, and it is where the thing you spent forty evenings on actually works.

Further reading: [Wall Art: How It Changes a Room](#)

The mistakes chapter

This is the longest chapter in the book, and it is the one to read when something has gone wrong. It is arranged by when the mistake happens rather than by how serious it is, so you can find yours quickly.

Almost nothing here is permanent. Acrylic is opaque, forgiving and easy to paint over, which is why this is a format where beginners produce good results. The mistakes that genuinely cannot be undone are few, and they are marked.

Part one — before you start

1. Buying an unframed canvas expecting to stretch it later
This one cannot be undone, and it is the most consequential mistake in the book.

Our unframed canvases are trimmed close to the printed image. There is not enough margin to wrap around stretcher bars, and four separate customers have described discovering this after finishing a painting — one measured the canvas at about a quarter of an inch under a standard 16 by 20 frame.

Prevention: buy framed if you want a stretched painting at the end. **If it has already happened:** mount it on a rigid board with spray adhesive, use a frame with a mat that covers the edge, or glue it to a pre-stretched blank canvas. All three work well. Chapter 3 has the detail.

2. Choosing a canvas that is too small for the design

A detailed design on the smaller canvas compresses every section, and the fine areas drop below the width of a comfortable brushstroke. The design is not more complex at 12 by 16; it is the same design with less room.

Prevention: the more detailed the design, the larger the canvas. Chapter 2 and Chapter 4. **If it has already happened:** a finer brush and better light recover most of it. Chapter 6.

3. Ironing the canvas

Do not iron a canvas that has paint on it, ever. Be cautious even before you start, because direct heat can affect the printed lines.

Prevention: ours arrive rolled rather than folded, so flattening is all that is needed — lay it face up and weight the corners with books for a few hours.

4. Not setting up properly, and then not being able to leave it out

The strongest predictor of whether one of these gets finished is whether it can stay set up. A kit that has to be cleared for every meal turns a ten-minute setup into a nightly tax, and that is how canvases end up in cupboards.

Prevention: claim a corner, a card table or a tray. Chapter 5.

5. Working in bad light and blaming the printing

The printed lines are light on purpose, because dark printing shows through finished paint. The most common complaint about these kits is difficulty reading the numbers, and most of it is a lighting problem rather than a printing problem.

Prevention: a lamp low and to the side, with a neutral white bulb, before buying anything else. Chapter 6 covers the whole subject, including glare, magnification and the phone-camera trick.

6. Not checking the kit when it arrives

Open the box when it arrives rather than the evening you plan to start. Count the pots against the highest number on the printout, check the brushes are there, and unroll the canvas to flatten it.

Kits very occasionally arrive with something missing. Our reviews include customers who were short a paint pot or a set of brushes, and in each case it was resolved once they got in touch

— one had replacement brushes sent out within days. What you do not want is to discover it at nine o'clock on the night you finally had time to start.

Prevention: open it, check it, flatten the canvas. Five minutes.

If something is missing: email support@ledgebay.com with the design name and what is short.

7. Choosing a demanding design as a first canvas

Not a mistake exactly, but the commonest cause of an abandoned painting. People choose from a photograph, and the most detailed designs photograph the best — dense foliage and intricate reflections look spectacular on a screen and represent forty hours of very small sections.

Prevention: read the design before buying it. Chapter 4 gives three signals that take thirty seconds to check. If you want a demanding design, take it at the larger size and go in knowing.

8. Not looking at the design before you start painting

Two minutes with the 11 by 17 printout before the first brushstroke tells you where the difficult region is, which colors dominate, and whether the background is one mass or twenty pieces. That shapes the order you work in, which is the whole of Chapter 7.

Prevention: look first. It is the cheapest planning you will ever do.

Part two — while you are painting

9. Judging coverage while the paint is wet

The single most common cause of unnecessary work. Wet acrylic looks far more transparent than dry acrylic, because the binder is milky when wet and clear when dry. A section that looks alarmingly thin going on is frequently solid twenty minutes later.

Prevention: paint it, leave it, look again when dry. Never add a second coat to wet paint.

10. Painting two adjacent sections wet, one after the other

Wet paint meeting wet paint bleeds across the boundary and destroys the crisp edge you were being careful about.

Prevention: paint a section, then move to a non-adjacent one while the first sets. Ten to twenty minutes is enough. This is the practical reason the color-grouped order in Chapter 7 works better than painting one region to completion.

11. Wiping a mistake immediately

The instinct when paint crosses a line is to wipe it at once, which smears wet paint across two sections and turns a small problem into a larger one.

Prevention: wait. Let it dry, then paint the neighboring section normally. Acrylic is opaque, and around ninety percent of over-the-line mistakes disappear entirely when the adjacent

color goes on.

12. Over-brushing, and the streaks it causes

Acrylic begins to grab within a minute or two. Brushing back over a section after that drags the setting film into ridges.

Prevention: lay the paint on in a few strokes and leave it alone.

If it has already happened: let it dry completely and apply one clean second coat in a single pass.

13. Over-thinning the paint

Harder to undo than any other mistake here. Water dilutes the binder as well as the pigment, and past a point there is not enough binder left to bond the paint to the canvas. It dries chalky and dull, sits on the surface rather than in it, and can be rubbed off with a fingertip.

Prevention: add water one drop at a time, and mix it in the lid or on foil rather than in the pot. Never thin the whole pot. **If it has already happened:** let it dry and cover it with unthinned paint straight from the pot.

14. Leaving the lids off

An open pot in a warm room loses usable consistency in under an hour. The commonest cause of a kit drying out is not storage time but a set of lids left off across one long afternoon.

Prevention: open one pot, use it, close it. Wipe the rim so the lid seats properly.

15. Leaving brushes standing bristles-down in water

This bends the tip permanently within a couple of hours, and that brush will never draw a clean line again.

Prevention: rinse, reshape the tip with your fingers, lay it flat.

16. Using the wrong size brush

Too small a brush on a large area is the commonest cause of a patchy, streaky fill, because it takes many more strokes and each one starts to set before the next arrives.

Prevention: match the brush to the section. Use the largest brush you can for every area.

17. Leaving hairline gaps between sections

Each color stops just short of the printed line, and the line plus a hair either side never gets painted. One gap is invisible; a canvas full of them reads as a white web running through the picture.

Prevention: cover the printed line rather than stopping at it. The line is a guide, not a border to preserve. **If it has already happened:** go round with the finest brush and the darker of each pair of adjacent colors. Half an hour, and it is the single most effective finishing pass available.

18. Saving the hardest region for last

People naturally leave the dense foliage until the end, by which point they are tired of the painting and the remaining work is the least rewarding part of it. This is how canvases get abandoned at ninety percent.

Prevention: do the fiddly region early, in a fresh sitting, and let the broad easy masses be the reward.

19. Not using the 11 by 17 printout

It is not packaging. When a number will not resolve on the canvas, the printout is where you read it, and one customer said explicitly that it was what made an awkwardly printed canvas workable.

Prevention: prop it up beside you rather than leaving it flat under the canvas or in the bag.

20. Substituting craft-shop paint for a color that ran out

The colors in a kit were mixed for that specific design. A green from a craft shop that looks identical in the pot will read as a patch on canvas, because it sits directly against sections painted in the original.

Prevention: the matching Extra Paint set for your design.
Chapter 11.

21. Not stirring a pot before using it

Pigment is heavier than the binder and settles. A pot that has stood for a week has thin, weak liquid at the top and the color concentrated at the bottom, so the first sections you paint come out pale and the coverage is poor.

Prevention: stir each pot properly before use — right down to the bottom with a toothpick, not a swirl across the surface. This alone fixes a surprising number of complaints about coverage.

22. Painting a section before checking the number twice

Every painter does this once. You load a brush, fill a good-sized area, and realize it was number eight rather than number three.

Prevention: read the number, find the pot, then read the number on the pot before the brush touches canvas. **If it has already happened:** it is entirely recoverable. Let it dry completely, then paint the correct color over it, unthinned, straight from the pot. Two coats will hide almost any error. Only a very pale color over a very dark one gives real trouble, and even then an intermediate coat of an opaque mid-tone underneath will fix it.

23. Resting your hand on finished work

Skin oils resist acrylic, so a section painted over a spot where a hand has rested can bead or fail to adhere evenly. And a hand resting on paint that is not fully dry will lift it.

Prevention: work top to bottom so your hand is always over unpainted canvas, and put a clean sheet of paper under your hand if you must rest it on finished areas.

24. Not changing the water

A single water pot turns muddy within about twenty minutes, and after that every brush comes out slightly dirty. Nobody notices it happening; it shows up as colors that look duller on the canvas than they did in the pot.

Prevention: two pots, dirty rinse then clean rinse, and change both when the second one clouds. Chapter 5.

25. Stopping in the middle of a section

A section painted in two halves an hour apart can leave a visible seam where the second half went on over a dried edge.

Prevention: stop at a natural boundary. If caught out, feather the wet edge thin with an almost-dry brush and plan on a full second coat.

26. Working on the easel when you should be working flat

The tabletop easel that comes with framed kits is genuinely useful, and it is the wrong surface for fine detail. An angled canvas is kinder on your neck for broad areas, but it gives you nothing to rest your hand against, and unsupported hands shake.

Prevention: broad areas on the easel, fine detail flat on the table with your forearm resting. Stand it back up at the end of the evening to look at it. Chapter 8.

27. Over-working a section that was already finished

Adding a third and fourth coat to a section that already passes builds thickness at the edges, and eventually those edges become visible ridges that catch the light.

Prevention: the three-point check in Chapter 9 — no number visible, an even film, a consistent surface. If it passes, stop.

28. Forgetting that second coats double the time

People estimate how long a canvas will take by looking at its area, then discover that two or three of the colors are the transparent kind and need a second pass. That is not a small adjustment.

Prevention: when estimating, assume some colors will need two coats. Chapter 9 explains which ones — generally the yellows, bright reds and oranges.

29. Leaving a wet canvas where dust or a cat can reach it

Dust settling into wet acrylic sets into it permanently, and a paw print across a finished sky is not repairable by wiping.

Prevention: lay a clean sheet of paper over the canvas when you stop for the night, and put it somewhere the household cannot get to it.

Part three — finishing and after

30. Varnishing before the paint has cured

Difficult to reverse. Touch-dry takes minutes; curing takes weeks. Sealing a canvas that is still releasing water traps moisture under the varnish, which can cloud it, leave it tacky, or lift the paint.

Prevention: wait at least a week, and two is safer. You can frame and hang it long before that — only sealing needs the wait.

31. Varnishing in the wrong conditions

Dust settling into wet varnish is permanent. Humidity causes clouding. Applying it upright causes runs. Going back over a coat that has begun to set leaves streaks that cannot be fixed.

Prevention: clean, dry room, canvas flat, two thin coats rather than one thick one, and no second passes over setting varnish. Test on the canvas edge first.

32. Hanging it too high

The commonest domestic hanging mistake by a wide margin. Galleries put the center of the picture at about 57 to 60 inches from the floor, which is average eye level.

Prevention: measure to the center of the picture, not the top of the frame. Over furniture, leave six to eight inches between the two.

33. Hanging it in direct sunlight

Ultraviolet light fades pigment over years, and reds and yellows go first — precisely what makes an aged landscape look wrong.

Prevention: bright indirect light. Avoid bathrooms and the space directly above radiators and stoves, where humidity and heat cycling can craze the paint.

34. Cleaning it with anything damp

Cannot be undone. Unvarnished acrylic is porous, and a damp cloth or any household cleaner will lift pigment.

Prevention: a dry, soft brush or a clean microfiber cloth, gently. If you want a surface you can wipe, varnish it.

35. Re-rolling a finished canvas

The cured paint film is flexible but is not designed to be bent back on itself, and rolling a finished painting can craze the surface.

Prevention: store finished canvases flat, face up, with a sheet of paper over the front.

36. Framing it before it has cured

Different from varnishing too soon, and less obvious. A painting pressed against glass or a mount while the paint is still hardening can stick to it, and the mark left when it is pulled away is permanent.

Prevention: if the painting is going behind glass or against a mount, give it the same wait you would give varnish. A week minimum, two if the paint went on thickly.

37. Storing the paints somewhere warm

Warmth and light both accelerate water loss, so a kit left on a sunny windowsill or on top of a radiator between sittings will dry out far faster than one in a drawer.

Prevention: lids on, pots upright, somewhere cool and dark.
Chapter 10.

38. Throwing away the leftover paint

Keep it. It is the only paint that will ever match this painting invisibly, and a canvas that gets knocked in a move or scuffed during mounting is repaired in two minutes with the original color.

The mistake that is not a mistake

Expecting the finished painting to look exactly like the photograph on the box.

It will not, and that is not a fault in the kit or in your painting. A painting with soft gradations becomes flat areas of color when it is separated into numbered sections, so a sunset that moved through forty shades arrives as eleven bands.

Several of our customers have described this, usually while also saying the result was beautiful. One noted that the painting did

not really match the picture that came with it, and that it came out beautiful anyway. Both halves of that are correct.

Painted well, it reads as the photograph from across the room. Held six inches from your face it reads as sections. The painting lives on a wall, so the first of those is the one that counts. Before you decide a section is wrong, stand back and look at it from the far side of the room. Most of the time the answer is that there was never a problem.

Further reading: [15 Paint by Numbers Mistakes to Avoid](#) · [How to Fix Paint by Numbers Mistakes](#)

Painting from your own photograph

Everything so far has been about a design somebody else chose. This chapter is about the version where you supply the picture.

A custom canvas is the same product with one difference: instead of a licensed painting, the design is made from a photograph you send us. We convert the image into numbered outlines, mix a paint set to match its colors, and ship it as a complete kit. Your canvas is printed here in the USA after you order, rather than drop-shipped from overseas, which is the main reason it arrives in a sensible window and why there is a person who can look at your file before it goes to print.

What people send

The house they grew up in. A wedding photograph. A grandchild. A dog. A view from a trip they keep talking about. The common thread is that the person painting it spends ten or twenty hours with a picture that means something, and ends up with an object rather than a file on a phone.

That is the real difference from a stock design, and it is worth being clear-eyed about: the painting is not better because it is custom. It is more personal, which for a lot of people is the entire point, and for others is not.

The honest part: what the conversion does to your photo

This is the section to read before you choose a picture, because it decides how the finished painting looks more than anything else does.

The conversion reduces your photograph to flat areas of a single color. Detail that depends on subtle gradation does not survive it. That is not a limitation of our process specifically — it is what paint by numbers *is*, and Chapter 1 describes the same mechanism working on a stock design.

The practical consequence: **photographs that already read clearly as shapes convert well, and photographs that depend on fine tonal transitions do not.**

Photographs that work

- **Bright, even light.** Daylight beats a dim indoor shot every time.
- **The subject large in the frame.** A face from the shoulders up, rather than a full-length figure across a room.

- **Clear separation between subject and background.** A dog against a plain wall converts cleanly. The same dog in long grass of a similar color does not.
- **One or two subjects** — or a larger canvas if there are more.

Photographs that struggle

- **Heavy backlighting**, where the subject is in shadow against a bright window or sky.
- **Motion blur**, or a low-resolution crop pulled out of a group shot.
- **Busy patterned backgrounds** that compete with the subject.
- **Very dark photographs**, where everything resolves to the same two or three tones.

The hardest thing this format does is a group shot with several small faces. Faces carry a great deal of information in very small tonal differences, and when each face is only an inch across there are not enough sections to hold a likeness. If a group photograph is the plan, go large — and read the sizing section below before choosing.

If you are not sure whether a particular picture will work, send it to us before you order. We will tell you honestly. We would rather say so in advance than have you disappointed by a canvas, and this is the single most useful thing in this chapter.

Which file to send

This part is practical and it makes a real difference to the result.

Send the original. Go to wherever the photograph actually lives — the camera roll, the phone, the original file — and send that. The largest version you have is the right one.

Avoid re-shared copies. A picture that has been sent through a messaging app, downloaded from a social media post, or forwarded through several people has usually been compressed at every step. It may look fine on a phone screen and still lack the detail needed to separate cleanly into sections. If the only copy you have came off Facebook, ask whoever posted it for the original.

Do not send a screenshot, and do not send a photograph of a photograph taken on a phone unless there is no alternative. If you are copying an old print, lay it flat in indirect daylight, hold the camera square above it, and avoid casting your own shadow across it.

Crop it yourself first, or tell us how to crop it. You know what the subject is. If the person is small in the corner of a wide shot, crop in so that they fill the frame before sending, and check that the cropped version still looks sharp. A tight crop of a high-resolution photograph is far better than the full frame of a low-resolution one.

Older and imperfect photographs are usually fine. Slight softness, some grain, and the color cast of an old print all matter

much less than you would think, because the conversion is reducing everything to flat areas anyway. What it cannot work with is a subject that is too small, too dark or too blurred to separate from its background.

Choosing a size for a custom canvas

Custom canvases come in **three** sizes rather than the two offered on stock designs, and all three are available framed or unframed:

size	best for
12 x 16	a single subject — one face, one pet, one building. The most popular first custom canvas
16 x 20	the middle option and the easier one to paint. Larger sections, kinder on the eyes
18 x 24	more than one subject, a group, or a wide landscape. Custom only

The sizing logic from Chapter 2 applies with more force here, because a custom design has not been simplified by an artist first. **The more faces, the larger the canvas** — this is not an upsell, it is the difference between a likeness and a smudge. If there are three people in the photograph, 18 by 24 is the honest recommendation.

The extra paint decision, which happens at checkout

Stock designs have a separate matching paint set you can buy later. **Custom canvases work differently:** because the palette is mixed for your individual photograph, extra paint is offered as an option at the time you order, where you can add one or two full extra sets to the kit.

That is the moment to decide. If your image is dominated by one color — a big sky, a lawn, a dark suit — a spare set removes the possibility of running that number down mid-project. Chapter 11 explains why a substitute color from a craft shop will not match.

How it works, start to finish

- 1 **Choose your size and finish**, framed or unframed, and add it to the cart.
- 2 **Upload your photo at checkout.**
- 3 **We convert it** to a numbered canvas and match the paints to your image.
- 4 **It ships as a complete kit**, ready to paint.

Everything else in this book then applies unchanged. The setup in Chapter 5, the light in Chapter 6, the painting order in Chapter 7, the brushwork in Chapter 8. A custom canvas is not harder to paint than a stock one — it is simply a design nobody has painted before.

Painting a custom canvas is slightly different

One practical difference nobody mentions, and it matters.

With a stock design you have a reference painting — the full-color photo in the box shows you exactly what the finished thing should look like, because somebody has already painted it.

With a custom canvas, your own photograph is the reference, and it is the only one that exists.

So print it. Get a copy printed at a reasonable size, or at minimum keep it open on a tablet propped beside the canvas, and treat it the way Chapter 6 treats the 11 by 17 printout. When you cannot tell what a region is meant to be — and on a custom canvas you will hit this more often, because the design was generated rather than composed — the photograph is the answer.

Two smaller differences. **Faces reward patience**, so if there is one in your canvas, paint it early in a sitting when you are fresh rather than at the end of a long evening. And **the sections in a custom design are less tidy** than in a design an artist has drawn: a generated separation follows the photograph exactly, which means more irregular shapes and more small fragments than a stock design of comparable size. Nothing about that is harder to paint, but it looks busier on the canvas before you start, and it is worth knowing so it does not read as a fault.

Subjects, and what each one needs

A person, or two. The most common request and the one most sensitive to size. One face converts well at 12 by 16. Two people need 16 by 20. Three or more need 18 by 24, and the honest answer is that the more faces there are, the more the result depends on the photograph being sharp and well lit.

A pet. Converts well when there is contrast between the animal and what is behind it. Fur is forgiving — it becomes areas of tone rather than individual hairs, which reads correctly at a distance. What causes trouble is a dark animal against a dark background, where there is nothing for the separation to find.

A house or a building. One of the best subjects this format has, because architecture is already made of flat planes and straight lines. Photograph it in the middle of the day with the light on the front of the building rather than behind it.

A landscape or a view. Works well and suits the wider 18 by 24. Look for a clear foreground, middle distance and sky rather than an undifferentiated expanse.

What to expect from the result

It will look like a painting of your photograph. It will not look like a photocopy of it, and the people who are happiest with theirs are the ones who wanted the former.

A well-chosen photograph on an appropriate size, painted carefully, produces something that reads unmistakably as that

house, that dog, that person, from across a room. That is a genuinely remarkable thing to have made by hand, and it is not the same object as a printed photograph on a canvas, which anyone can order in five minutes and nobody spends twenty hours with.

Before you order, in one list

1. **Find the original file** — not a screenshot, not a copy pulled off social media.
2. **Check the light.** Bright and even beats dim and atmospheric every time.
3. **Crop so the subject fills the frame**, and check it still looks sharp cropped.
4. **Count the faces**, then pick the size: one face 12 by 16, two 16 by 20, three or more 18 by 24.
5. **Look at the background.** If it is the same tone as your subject, choose a different photo.
6. **Decide on extra paint** at checkout, especially if one color dominates the image.
7. **If you are unsure, send it to us first.** We would rather say so before it goes to print.

Where to look: [Custom Paint by Numbers](#) · [Turn a Photograph into a Paint by Number: What Changes](#)

Giving one as a gift

A painting kit is a good gift and a bad last-minute gift, and the difference is entirely about which of two things you are giving. This chapter is mostly arithmetic, because the arithmetic is the part nobody tells you and the part people discover in November.

The two different gifts

You paint it, and give the finished painting. The gift is the painting. The lead time is your painting time, which is measured in weeks.

You give the kit, and they paint it. The gift is the kit. The lead time is shipping, which is measured in days.

These have completely different deadlines. Almost everyone who runs out of time was doing the first and planning like the second.

If you are painting it yourself

The arithmetic has three parts: getting the canvas, painting it, and a margin for life.

Getting the canvas. Handling plus transit is about a week for a stock kit. **For a custom canvas made from your photograph, allow longer** — it is printed after you order rather than picked from a shelf, and November and December are the busiest production weeks of the year. Add a week beyond what you would allow for a stock kit, and more if you are ordering in the run-up to Christmas.

Painting it. This is the variable that matters, and it depends on the design far more than on you. From Chapter 4: a forgiving design runs about **10 to 20 hours**, and a heavily detailed one can be **three or four times that**. What turns hours into weeks is your own pace.

your pace	a forgiving design	a detailed design
A couple of evenings a week (about 4 hours)	3 to 5 weeks	10 to 20 weeks
Most evenings (about 8 hours)	1.5 to 3 weeks	5 to 10 weeks

A margin. Two weeks. Christmas is a period when people have less spare time than usual, not more.

So when do you need to order

Christmas Day 2026 falls on a **Friday**. Counting back from it:

- **A detailed design at a couple of evenings a week is already tight in September.** If that is the plan, order now or choose a more forgiving design.

- **Early October** is the sensible general deadline. It covers a mid-range design at a moderate pace with the margin intact, and it is the date we would give if you made us pick one.
- **Mid-November** works only for a forgiving design at a good pace, with no interruptions.

That is not a sales deadline, and you can check it against your own pace rather than taking our word for it. If you paint most evenings you can start later than the general answer. If you paint on the occasional Sunday, October is already optimistic and we would rather say so now than in December.

If you are giving the kit

Much simpler. The only clock is shipping.

Order by around the middle of December and it will arrive in time. Handling is a couple of business days and delivery runs a few days after that, and the buffer covers the weather and carrier delays that are normal at that time of year. If it is going to be tight, email support@ledgebay.com before you order and we will tell you honestly whether we can make the date.

Which kit makes the better gift

Framed, nearly every time. The recipient opens the box, stands the canvas on the included tabletop easel and begins. Nothing to mount, no frame to buy, no decision to make.

An unframed canvas asks them to solve a mounting problem months later, and as Chapter 3 explains, our unframed canvases cannot be stretched over bars afterwards. That is a poor thing to hand somebody as a present.

Two more things worth knowing. **Framed kits ship boxed and unframed kits ship in a tube** — the boxed one looks like a present when it is handed over, while a tube needs wrapping and the canvas inside needs flattening before anyone can start, which is a deflating first ten minutes on a birthday. And **choose the size for the person**: anyone who uses reading glasses for close work should be given the 16 by 20, where the printed numbers are physically larger.

Giving the finished painting well

If you have spent forty evenings on something, the handover is worth five minutes of thought.

Sign and date it, on the front in a color from the palette or on the back in pencil. Chapter 12 explains why: in twenty years the thing that will matter is who painted it and when.

Say how long it took. Not as a claim on their gratitude, but because it is genuinely the interesting part and nobody can tell by looking. A note on the back — the design, the year, roughly how many evenings — turns an object into a record.

Let them choose where it hangs, and hand it over unframed-but-mounted rather than framed, if you are unsure of

their taste in frames. Chapter 12 covers mounting.

Painting one together

Worth mentioning because it comes up in our reviews more than you might expect: families and couples work on a single canvas together, and it suits the format unusually well.

The mechanism makes it possible. Because every decision has already been made, two people can work on the same painting without needing to agree about anything — one takes the sky while the other does the foreground, and the result is consistent regardless of who painted which section. Very few creative activities allow that.

A larger canvas is the better choice for this, simply because two people need somewhere to put their hands. One of our customers described a whole family working on a single canvas over a winter, which is about as good an argument for the 16 by 20 as we could make.

If you do not know which design they would want

Two reasonable answers.

A gift card, which moves the choice to them. Given that the design decides both the difficulty and the time, and neither is obvious from a photograph, this is a more thoughtful option than it sounds.

A forgiving design in a subject they like. Large shapes, clear separation of light and dark, a moderate palette. Chapter 4 explains how to read a design from its photograph in about thirty seconds, and names several from our own range.

What we would avoid is giving a beginner one of the demanding designs because it looked the most impressive on screen. The finished painting is more striking, and the odds of it being finished at all are considerably lower.

Where to look: Gift cards · 12 x 16 framed · 16 x 20 framed

A short history of paint by numbers

The format you have been using is about seventy-five years old, and it was invented in Detroit by a paint company looking for something to sell.

Palmer Paint, and an idea from an apprentice's workshop

In the early 1950s, **Max Klein**, who ran the Palmer Paint Company in Detroit, and **Dan Robbins**, a commercial artist working for him, developed a kit that let people with no training produce a finished painting. The canvases were printed with numbered regions and packaged with matching numbered paints, and they were sold under the brand name **Craft Master**.

Robbins said the idea came from a teaching method attributed to Leonardo da Vinci, who was described as giving apprentices numbered patterns to fill in so that they could contribute to a larger work before they could compose one themselves. Whether or not the attribution is exact, it is a fair description of what the format does: it separates the decisions from the labor,

and hands you the labor.

The Smithsonian's National Museum of American History holds the **Paint By Number Collection** (NMAH.AC.0544), covering Palmer Paint Sales Company and its Craft Master kits — the primary record of where all of this came from.

An enormous, slightly embarrassing success

The kits sold in the millions through the mid-1950s. They arrived at a moment when Americans had more leisure time and more wall space than they had before, and they answered both at once.

The reaction from the art world was close to contempt. The objection was that a paint by numbers canvas is not creative work, because the creative decisions were made by somebody else. That criticism is correct, and it has never really been answered, because it does not need to be. Almost nobody paints one believing they have composed it. They paint one because the evenings are good.

There is a genuine cultural argument buried in the sneering, though, and it is the one the Smithsonian was interested in: for a great many people these kits were the first time they had ever made a picture at all. Whatever that is, it is not nothing.

Why it worked when it did

The timing was not an accident. The kits arrived in a decade when a great many households had, for the first time, both spare evenings and walls they wanted to put something on. A finished painting cost a few dollars and an evening or two, at a moment when original art was for other people.

They were also a product of their moment in a less flattering way. Kits were sold by the million, which meant the same handful of scenes — mountain lakes, harbors, horses, the Last Supper — hung in an enormous number of homes at once. That sameness is a large part of why the format became a shorthand for suburban conformity, and why it took decades to shake off.

A note on how long paintings take

People assume the great paintings took years, and some did — Michelangelo spent roughly four on the Sistine Chapel ceiling.

But the assumption is often wrong in the other direction. Van Gogh painted *The Starry Night* at Saint-Rémy in **June 1889**, over a matter of days, not months. If your canvas has taken you six weeks of evenings, you are in respectable company, and the comparison is less absurd than it sounds: you have both been putting one area of color next to another until the picture appeared.

And now

The format has outlasted the company that invented it, the critics who dismissed it, and several cycles of fashion. What has changed is mostly quality — better canvas, better pigment, licensed original artwork rather than generic scenes, and the ability to make a kit from your own photograph, which Dan Robbins could not have done.

The revival is worth a sentence, because it says something about why you are holding this. These kits came back in the last decade or so not as nostalgia but as one of the few hobbies that asks for a couple of hours and gives back something you can hang up. The reasons people give now — the evenings, the quiet, having somewhere to put your hands that is not a screen — are almost exactly the reasons people gave in 1955, minus the wall space and plus the screens.

What has not changed is the mechanism, or the reason people do it. Somebody separates a picture into flat areas of color. You put them back together. It works exactly as well as it did in 1953.

Further reading: [Paint by Numbers History: How It Started](#)

Where to go next

The kits

- 12 x 16 framed · 16 x 20 framed · Unframed 16 x 20
- Custom Paint by Numbers, from your own photograph
- Extra Paint — a matching set for every design
- Gift cards

If something has gone wrong

- Dry or hardened paint, and what to do — Chapter 10
- Tips that actually work — Chapter 6
- How to fix mistakes — Chapter 13

Finishing it

- Do you need to varnish? · The best varnish — Chapter 12
- Frame or mount an unframed canvas — Chapters 3 and 12
- See what other people finished

Questions Email support@ledgebay.com. If you want a second opinion on whether a photograph will convert well before you order a custom canvas, send it over and we will tell you honestly.

Ledgebay is a veteran-owned business.