

John Salminen

## By Michelle Taute Solve State Solve State

Take a behind-the-scenes tour of three popular painters' workspaces and learn how to set up a workable studio of your own.

When you think of your favorite painters, it's natural to fantasize about the idyllic studios in which they must work: A converted barn with perfect north light or a warehouse loft with exposed brick walls. But the truth is most artists are more likely to be painting on the kitchen table or in a spare bedroom than within the walls of a custom-built studio. Three artists told us how very different spaces work for them, and offered tips and ideas for making almost any space a great place to paint.









Donna Zagotta



Laurin McCracken

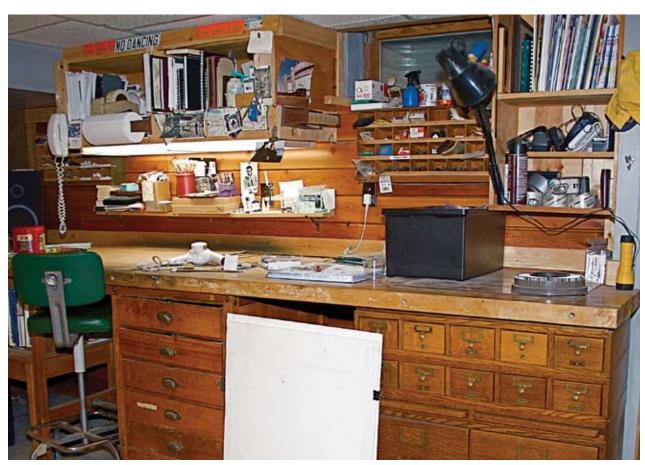
## John Salminen | A NO-FRILLS STUDIO

The two basement rooms where John Salminen paints his award-winning urban landscapes prove that great art doesn't require a fancy studio in order to happen. With unfinished walls and cast-off furniture, these spaces look like the before footage on a DIY show. But for Salminen, it's all about the painting. "I don't go into my studio to experience spiritual reawakening," he says. "As long as I've got my painting and my materials and an adequate light source, I basically go into the painting."

This process makes Salminen oblivious to everything around him, so he takes a completely utilitarian approach to the studio. Like many artists, he grabbed whatever space was available, taking over a basement bedroom when his son went to college. His work surface

is a counter he built from workbench tops and part of the base is formed by an old card catalog cabinet from a library. The counter rests about four feet off the ground, so Salminen sits on a stool to paint. A fluorescent fixture with daylight-corrected bulbs shines down from a shelf above, and Salminen's basic supplies—palette, brushes, water, paper towels, Kleenex tissues and blow dryer—all sit nearby.

Until recently, this small room (roughly 12x14 feet) also overflowed with bulk paper, finished paintings, shipping crates, foam core and matboard. "My studio looked like those stories you hear of people who die, and when someone goes in their home, they find it's piled up to the ceiling with just a little path that runs from the living room to the bathroom and kitchen," he



John Salminen's workbench

**Begin with the basics.** "You have to start simply by asking yourself, 'What does my painting process require in terms of space?' " says John Salminen. Then think about the type of space you need and what materials your artistic approach requires. The artist believes must-have supplies depend on an individual's painting process. His? A large, flat work surface.

says. Fortunately, he and his wife decided to convert the screened-in porch of their log home near Duluth, Minnesota, into a four-season sunroom, and this move meant digging out the basement under the space.

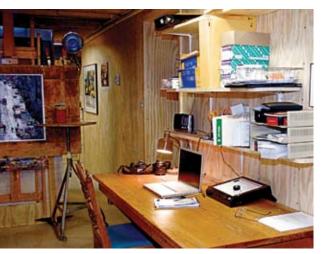
This new underground square footage gave Salminen a second room that he now uses for storage, a matting and framing station and a computer desk. To save money, he built simple shelves himself and snagged flat files on Craigslist for \$125. And since he doesn't entertain clients in the space, he left the floors concrete and the walls unfinished. It's budget-friendly and practical: He doesn't have to worry about splattering paint or tacking things right into the wall. Plus, having a studio in the house means he's just steps from his work if he has a few spare

moments. "When we're going out for dinner and my wife says, 'I need another 10 minutes to get ready,' I just walk down to the studio for that amount of time and paint," he says. "I can paint before breakfast in my bathrobe. I can paint late at night. It's absolutely easy to do when you don't have to go anywhere."

**Place a premium on storage.** "The shortcoming of most peoples' studios is inadequate storage," says Salminen. He recommends planning for more storage space than you think you'll ever need, so you'll have places for all the bulky items that come with painting—from framing supplies and framed paintings to shipping crates.



A matting and framing station



Office space



Diner (watercolor on paper, 25x36)



Flat files and packing materials storage

Focused In contrast to artists who have a number of works in various stages in their studios, John Salminen concentrates on one painting at a time. "Once I start painting, it becomes the total focus of my existence," he says. "Every day, I know when I get up that I'll go down to the studio to take up the process where I stopped it the day before, and the knowledge that I have a painting in progress is a comforting one."



Laurin McCracken's second-floor studio space

## Laurin McCracken | ORGANIZED PAINTING

When one of Laurin McCracken's workshop students stopped by to see his studio, she experienced a moment of shock when she reached the top of the stairs. "Oh my God, I couldn't paint here," she said. "It's too clean." But for McCracken, this Martha Stewart-esque level of organization is what makes his studio successful, and he gives credit for these neatnik tendencies to his grandmother, who always advocated, "A place for everything and everything in its place."

You can see this philosophy in action on the second floor of McCracken's Fort Worth, Texas, townhouse, where he turned a third bedroom

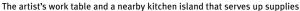
**Think creatively about furniture.** It doesn't have to be made for an artist in order to work in the studio. Laurin McCracken uses a small kitchen island as a taboret and stores additional supplies behind him on a baker's rack. Other ideas: TV stands, microwave carts, plastic storage drawers on wheels or small shelves.

View from studio into living room below

into a workspace for creating his breathtakingly realistic watercolors. From behind the simple but sturdy drafting table, he can look out over the two-story vaulted living room and still have everything he needs to paint within arm's reach. "If I'm in the middle of a big, wet painting and all of a sudden I need something, I know right where it is," he says. "I can get it instantly."

To his right, a small kitchen island holds drafting supplies inside and a palette and array of brushes on top. Immediately behind McCracken, a baker's rack and two bookcases create homes for everything from pencils and tracing paper to reference books and masking fluid. He can simply reach back, grab what he needs and keep painting. An Oriental rug underfoot adds inspirational beauty and cushions McCracken's feet as he paints from his perch on a stool. A nearby closet keeps paper, finished paintings, paper towels, water containers and other supplies out of sight.







Supply closet for extra materials

Detail-Oriented For one of his complex still life paintings, it's not unusual for Laurin McCracken to spend four to six hours on the drawing alone. "One of the great truisms about painting realism is that the more detailed the drawing," he says, "the better the painting and the more realistic the appearance of the objects." After creating an initial drawing, he'll spend another few hours correcting it, using a large photo print (typically 13x17 inches) as his guide. "If you want to capture a particular sparkle in silver, for example, it must be in the drawing, or when you get to that spot in the painting, you'll probably miss it," he says.

Even the light in this space shines right where it should. A t-grid placed on the ceiling holds five halogen lights, with three aimed at McCracken's painting surface to reduce shadows. The fourth points toward his palette, so the colors he mixes look the same when they hit the paper's surface, and the final light illuminates a spot on the wall where he sometimes hangs paintings to evaluate them. There's also plenty of eastern light from the windows, but McCracken uses honeycomb blinds to filter out the harsh sunlight as needed.

All this thoughtful placement and storage means McCracken doesn't have to waste time searching for the right brush or a pair of scissors. But creating an environment that supports uninterrupted work time doesn't have to be expensive. McCracken purchased most of his assemble-it-yourself furniture from discount retailers and works out of a fairly average-sized spare bedroom. In this space, it's really the thought—and organization—that counts.



Plymouth Silver Set (watercolor on paper, 27x18)

**Don't forget the water.** Being near a water source makes it easier to get fresh, clean water for your containers, which McCracken says many of his workshop students don't do often enough. He also recommends using warm water.



Donna Zagotta's workspace

## Donna Zagotta | AN INSPIRING SPACE

There's something about Donna Zagotta's bright, white studio that exudes good vibes. And perhaps all this positive energy stems from her theory about what's most important in an artist's studio. "Above all, it should be nurturing," she says. "It should be a place that you want to be. For me, it has to have little things that beckon me to come in here that are truly just my own." Among the practical furniture and supplies, she's made room for music, posters and mementos.

If you look closely, you might spot a large sign that says "Imagine," a little painted giraffe she just brought back from a workshop or a poster that reads "Painting the Perfect Picture." "I see that poster every time I paint, and it's very inspiring to me," she says. "It's things like this that remind me of places I've been with my art or places I want to go with my art." Zagotta moved

her studio from the basement of her Colonial house in Brighton, Michigan, to this 12x24-foot room off her kitchen in 1994.

She paints sitting behind the drafting table in the middle of the room but uses a clamp-on table easel connected to the adjacent rolling taboret as her actual work surface. There's plenty of flat surface area all around her—the architect's table jutting out into the room, the drafting table and the counter behind—to spread out reference photos, books, magazines and painting supplies. A computer desk in the corner provides a separate space for Photoshop and business work, and bookcases lining the walls of the room hold books, magazines and more.

There's also ample storage, from the hanging wall cabinets to inexpensive plastic boxes and drawers. Since the studio is next to the kitchen and part of her home, Zagotta likes to be able to

**Size doesn't matter, but height does.** "It's what you do with the space that counts," says Donna Zagotta. She recommends brainstorming creative work surface and storage ideas for small spaces, and even plotting the placement of everything out on graph paper. "But when it comes to your work table," she says, "it should be waist-high to facilitate watercolor painting."

**Be patient.** "I believe that a perfect studio doesn't happen overnight, but evolves over a number of years through experience, trial and error, and a constant examining of your everchanging needs as an artist," says Zagotta.



Bookshelves busting at the seams with favorite art titles and inspiring posters and collectibles



Space off the artist's kitchen to read and enjoy the light

put away her supplies quickly. Having a place for everything also keeps the space calm and her painting process efficient. For light, she relies on six fixtures with 15 florescent bulbs in a mixture of warm and cool. "I have to close my blinds," she says. "When the sun is out, the light is too beautiful in here, and it makes even the ugliest painting beautiful."

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A place to write and catch up on business



Looking Back No. 5 (watercolor and gouache on paper, 11x9)

Into Design When Donna Zagotta approaches a painting subject, she consciously ignores the details and descriptive aspects and looks at it formally—as a configuration of shapes, values, colors, lines and textures. "I call this strategy 'plugging my subject into design,' " she says. "Once I've translated the three-dimensional subject into a two-dimensional design, I stamp the image with the marks of my unique creative vision."



Get help choosing the right lighting for your studio space at <a href="https://www.artistsnetwork.com/article/wc-studio-lighting">www.artistsnetwork.com/article/wc-studio-lighting</a>.