Introduction to Painting with a Palette Knife

Using a palette knife as a painting tool enables the artist to paint with a looser technique than when using a brush. The concentration is on global values, shapes and colours instead of detail, creating an impressionistic painting with a thickly textured surface. This is also referred to as impasto.

History

In 1899 Charles Hawthorne, a New England artist and art teacher, established the outdoor painting school, The Cape Cod School of Art, which became one of the largest artist colonies in the world, where he invented the use of the palette knife. Hawthorne created a system of study that involved the use of a putty knife to apply the paint instead of the traditional brush and canvas. Always looking for ways for his students "to see and feel their subject" by painting the color masses or large simple areas of color, he encouraged the use of a putty knife which became the perfect tool to add large areas of color to a support, without concentrating on detail. This method was the precursor for the huge range of palette knife shapes and sizes available to artists today.
Holding the knife

Hold the handle firmly but comfortably, allowing the forefinger to rest on the crank of the handle, as shown. This will help guide direction and pressure. Movement of the wrist will change the angle of the knife in relation to the painting surface. The painting surface can also be inverted or tilted to allow easier access to surfaces and shapes.

Choosing a Mixing Palette

Because larger quantities of paint are required in the palette knife technique, a larger palette is also required for mixing paint. A minimum size of 9 x 12 is recommended. This can be a disposable paper palette (a grey neutral toned palette is recommended for best colour mixing). A sheet of acrylic or Perspex makes a good mixing palette and is easily scraped clean after painting sessions. Paint the reverse of the palette surface with a neutral grey colour to assist with seeing colours more easily or place it on a grey surface or paper.

Mixing Paint

Colour theory and knowledge of how to mix colours is essential in any painting and is no different in palette knife painting. Take a colour theory workshop to learn about colour mixing to ensure a painting has good composition, values and clear colour saturation.
There are many brands of palette and painting knives and all have similarities in shapes and sizes. Blades should flex easily and not break. Stainless steel blades are preferred over steel as they are less prone to rust. Knives that are used to apply acrylic paint are usually subject to water immersion either in the painting or cleaning process and can rust over time.

There are three categories of knives: a symmetrical knife with a rounded tip often used for mixing paint; a symmetrical knife with a pointed tip that is useful for detail work and creating sharp edges; and an asymmetrical knife with a pointed tip and a diagonal end. Just like any method of painting, work proceeds from large shapes to fine detail and knives come in varying sizes to enable artists to work in this method. The size and type of painting knife will depend on the size of painting being worked on.

Do not waste money on plastic painting knives. Plastic knives do not have the flexibility and size range that metal blades have and will invariably break under the general pressure of applying or mixing paint.
Background layers

Paint can be spread with a knife so that it covers a surface with little texture showing, similar to using a brush for covering large areas (right side of photo). By lifting the knife from the surface the action creates a thin ridge of paint, that builds interesting texture (left-hand side of photo). This technique is useful for covering large areas of a support at the beginning of a painting and for developing additional layers of paint.

**TIP:** If you're working with acrylic paint, you'll need to work fast or add some glazing medium or a paint retarder to your paint to extend drying time. Acrylic retardants commonly contain glycol or glycerine based additives. A homemade version of acrylic extender can be created using a 5:1 mix (water: glycerol).