

Brian's 20 Tips To Better Plein Air Paintings

©2008 by Brian Stewart

1. Paint what you Know & Love

All of us have stories to tell and things we want to share in paint. Things from our past. Experiences we've had. Regions we love. Hobbies, activities or areas of interest. We don't need to borrow themes and interest from other artists and eras. Today, too many artists are painting the same old, tired themes of the 19th Century. Get in touch with what you want to say and what scenes you want to share. Your paintings will be from the heart and the passion will show in the work.

2. It's either in light or in shadow.

Any object, be it a tree, rock, building, mountain or boat, under a single light source like the sun, has a sunlit side facing the light source and a shadow side facing away from the source. Keep them separate and unified in your painting. And generally warm & cool. Let the viewer know with no uncertainty, what's in light and what's in shadow. This is the single most violated rule of contemporary, representational painting. (Obviously this rule doesn't apply on gray, foggy days).

3. Establish the value hierarchy early

Look for the darkest dark, the next darkest and the next. Then look for the lightest light, the next lightest and the next. Nail these values on your lay-in. Nothing will give you better success in your paintings than accurate values. They are more important than good drawing, color, composition, edges etc.

4. Divorce your subject matter.

For the first 2/3 of your painting, intellectually divorce yourself from the subject matter your painting. Don't paint trees, mountains, buildings, clouds. Instead, paint shapes, values, colors, edges. Trust me, they will wind-up looking more like trees, mountains, buildings and clouds. I know an artist who paints in the studio from slides. For the first 2/3 of the painting, he puts the slide in the projector upside down and turns his canvas upside down, so he sees it only as shapes and values.

5. Paint the Dog first.

As a great Russian Impressionist said "Most artist's problem is they begin the painting by signing their name, next they paint the fleas and last they paint the dog". Establish the dog or the "Big Look" first. Using large brushes, get the big relationships of shapes, value and color. No details or fleas. This is a plan or road map that will guide you through the rest of the painting. The details (or fleas) will just become frosting on the cake that are a joy to paint.

6. See Shapes, Not Lines

Lines don't exist in nature, they're a convention. An Artist with training and a more sophisticated eye see things as shapes and masses. Not lines they draw and then fill-in, ala children's coloring books. Seeing shapes is a faster, more accurate way of drawing. When first starting a painting, allow yourself as few a lines as possible. Make these lines, single, straight, committed lines. Not vague, round, puffy forms. Then finish the drawing as you paint masses, striving for the shape of the mass and it's relationship to the other masses.

7. The art Tug-of-War

All good representational art is a tug-of-war between Unity and Variety. Unity usually always wins. By that I mean Unity of shape. Unity of color. Unity of value, texture, line, etc. Even Monet who used Variety extensively, erred on the side of unity. When you squint down at one of his paintings, the shapes, color, values and textures all hold together in a single unified way.

8. Paint it Twice.

How often has each of us done a painting and not been satisfied with the results. Then gone back to the very same spot, started anew under the same conditions and painted it with success. Why? Because we were familiar with it and had a plan. Our eyes had been over it several times and had sorted out what was going on and how to proceed. This in effect is what I'm doing when I do a complete lay-in of thin paint, covering all the white of the canvas. Besides establishing the shapes, values and edges, I'm familiarizing myself with the scene and developing a plan. I almost always paint everything better the second time.

9. Paint Like the Eye sees, Not the camera

When the camera takes in a field of vision, it sees everything sharp, top to bottom, side to side. No variety in what it portrays. When the human eye takes in a field of vision, it sees a center of interest and the objects in the surrounding periphery look different than if you were looking directly at them. The eye is also more affected by the poetry of what we are looking at. Objects might be soft, lost or have a different feel when viewed in our periphery as opposed to when we are looking straight at them. Try and be aware of this and emulate it in your paintings.

10. How it Feels vs. How it looks

It's more important how a painting feels than how it looks. We've all seen Wildlife paintings where every feather is laboriously rendered, yet the painting feels dead. And we've all seen plein air paintings that are loose, juicy and broad, but ring of the truth. It's because they are painted as the eye sees, not the camera. They have the feeling of the scene being depicted. They are also accurate in value and color because they were taken directly from nature and weren't altered through the photographic process which distorts and lies about everything. Don't just record facts. Get in touch with the character, light quality, gesture of a scene and try to convey that feeling in your painting.

11. Puddle Management

How you manage the paint on your pallet is as important as how you manage the paint on your canvas. Squeeze out twice as much paint as you think you'll need. Use large brushes and mix up puddles twice the size of what you think will do a passage. You will go back into these leftover puddles and modify them for other passages. They will also unify the color in your painting. I call these big puddles - Mother Puddles. When I complete a painting, I can look at my pallet with these Mother Puddles and their Off Spring and they tell me how confident and well I was painting that day.

12. Paint it in your Head first

Before you touch brush to canvas, go through the painting in your head first. Develop a plan. Decide what you are going to do and in what order. Just wading in is like taking a road trip without consulting a map. Which is sometimes OK for an impromptu Sunday drive, but I don't think it leads to successful paintings.

13. Detach from the Outcome

My best paintings happen when I get lost in the work and the world goes away. Freeing myself from distractions. Not thinking about the outcome and whether I'll get a frameable piece. I'm in the zone, thinking only about the immediate passage at hand and how best to do it. Not critically judging it other than for values, shape, color and edge. Doing it as best I can and then moving on to the next passage. This to me is the Zen of painting. I wish I could get there more often.

14. Lost and Found Edges

All good paintings have scales. Scales of values, scales of color, scales of shapes. They also have a scale of edges. From sharp, to hard, to soft, to softer and finally lost. Depending on the light conditions, the physical material (hair vs. rock) or how the artist wants to control the viewers eye. (The eye will go to sharpest edges first). Try and see the variety in edges by concentrating on the center of interest and seeing how the edges of the objects in your periphery look and feel. Then try and emulate that in your paintings. Sargent was a master at this.

15. Think like an 60's abstract painter

Good paintings work on an abstract level too. They have interesting shapes, colors, texture and surface quality. They also employ the elements of good design: Rhythm, balance, dominance, subordination. The arabesque and poetry of shapes. A good way to see this abstract design is to look at your painting from a great distance, or a slide of it with the bare eye or use a diminishing glass. Or turn it upside down or backwards through a mirror.

16. Paint like you're buttering toast.

Some students spend hundreds of dollars on tuitions, lodging and travel and then come to a workshop and try and save \$10 on paint. It's a false economy. After you get your initial, thin lay-in done, really lay on the paint. Particularly in the light areas, not so much the darks. Squeeze out a whole bunch of paint and about 3 or 4 times as much white as the colors. Try and not touch the brush to the canvas unless you are applying paint. As the great John Carlson said, "Paint like a Millionaire". It will make your paintings feel rich, confident & sensual. Thick, juicy paintings have a special quality.

17. Progress, not perfection

A good rule for life as well as paintings. You don't have to make your paintings perfect all at once with each stroke. Lighten up on yourself and try and move your paintings forward in small, bite size increments. You'll be amazed at how good they will look if you just try and improve them little by little. Take frequent breaks to freshen your eye. Use a mirror to look backwards at them. Then, always correct first what you see most wrong when you resume the work.

18. Show 'em the Tool Marks

There's something magical about a plein air painting that when viewed up very close to it, you can see the tool marks and just how the artist did it. It has a quality that makes everyone think "That's not so hard, I could do that". Then when you step back 10 feet it all drops into focus and looks beautiful, effortless and seamless. I've seen people at my exhibits first walk into the room and a smile appears on their face. They then walk over to a painting to get a closer view and you see a look of disappointment come over them. Then they walk back and a smile appears again. That's the effect I'm looking for. Laborious, slick, academic technique does not have that "I could do that" quality and is not intellectually accessible. It's a little off-putting. It reeks of labor and nobody wants to do that much work. That's why I think plein air paintings have such a universal appeal.

19. Quality through Quantity

I don't know how to turn out a quality painting ever time I step up to the easel. The qualities that make a painting work and touch people in a special way, I can only get through playing the yield. No matter how hard I try, I have to turn out a lot of paintings and through that process I will get a few that have those intangible qualities I'm looking for. That is what is so mysterious and illusive about outdoor painting and that is also what's so compelling and keeps me coming back. You never know when you are going to really nail one. But when you do, it makes it all worth while.

20. You can run, but you can't hide

When painting, it's pretty revealing. You can't hide from how you're feeling. If you're not in a good place that day or you're not really enthusiastic about the subject matter, it will show in the work. Art is Therapy. It reveals almost as much about you as it does the subject matter. When I'm down or angry or not feeling well, I can see it in the work. Sometimes I just give in to it and don't paint. Other times I force myself to go through the motions and it picks me up. I've really surprised myself by turning out really good work when I least expected it. Again, that's the illusive, intangible quality of painting.