

HOW I DO A PLEIN-AIR OIL PAINTING

By Brian Stewart

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Outdoor oil sketches, like many other things, are relatively easy if you break them down into small, bite-size steps. Think of these 4 Steps as layers or skins. The first 3 steps are a very quick “dress rehearsal” and the 4th Step is the actual painting of the painting. You are basically painting the painting twice. This method offers many advantages such as: familiarizing yourself with the subject, it gives you a plan and procedure, aids in unifying the color, works out compositional problems, lets you paint with bravura and confidence in the 4th step and yields a painting that says: Craftsmanship. It requires a little more time, but is well worth it. It differs from the way most plein air painters paint by trying to paint to a finish all at once.

LAYER 1: THE DRAWING

“It doesn’t matter how you put the paint on. If the drawing isn’t right, it will never look right.”

A centuries-old, easy way to get accurate drawing is with the aid of a view finder. It’s a piece of black cardboard about 8x10 with a hole cut in it the same proportion as the canvas I’m using. The hole is about 3 3/4 x 5 if I am using a 9x12 or 12x16 canvas. I’ve added cross hairs to my view finder and draw corresponding cross hair lines on my canvas. I hold the view finder at arms length and observe the shapes in nature that I find in the four sections created by my cross hairs. Using thin paint and a small brush, I draw using as few lines as possible. I force myself to use straight, committed lines, even if I’m drawing round forms like clouds, trees, rocks. With straight lines you’ll capture the character and gesture more. Using the straight brush handle as a tool and holding it out at arms length, I pay attention to angles, size relationships, where things point, horizon lines and vanishing points. With this method I’m able to do a very accurate, very economical drawing, very quickly. This view finder is also an aid in finding paintings, I drive around with one in the car.

LAYER 2: THE LAY-IN

“Get something down so you have something to correct”

Next, I lay in the big, major shapes, almost as if I'm using cut paper of the approximate value (degree of lightness and darkness) and color. I try for a big, broad, simple flat pattern look, ignoring the detail. It should look almost adolescent. I want to get the entire canvas covered as quickly as possible. The value of these shapes should be an overall average of that particular shape. I cannot make accurate judgments about values and color until I get rid of the white canvas. I'm also trying to freeze the light and shadow patterns and not chase the light.

I do this lay-in with thin washes of paint diluted with thinner using as big a brush as possible. I don't want to get the paint too thick in the beginning. These thin washes do not have to be perfect for color and value, but I try and get them as close as possible. The operative words here are: Progress, not perfection. Keep in mind the best results are achieved by painting dark to light. The opposite produces mud. So if anything, err on the side of having the lay-in just a little dark... if not right-on. I've learned the better my lay-in, the better my finish. With the lay-in done, at 30 feet it should look like a finished painting.

LAYER 3: THE CORRECTION

“A painting is like life, it's just a series of corrected mistakes.”

Now that I have something down, I should be able to, as objectively as possible, evaluate it and correct it. I always correct first what I see is most wrong with the work. I start by looking for drawing errors. A mirror may help to freshen up my eye. Next I look at the values. Does the darkest dark and lightest light correspond with nature? If not, I'll have to correct them. They will be the relative keys that all values in between will be judged against. Nothing is more important than correct values to make the color look right. I can also evaluate the composition. Move elements around as I wish to create a more pleasing arrangement, center of interest or eye flow. Last, I look at the color and ask myself, is it too light or too dark, is it too warm or too cool, is it too red or too blue or

whatever? If it doesn't look right, I correct it. Does the color feel too local? By that I mean green leaves, brown tree trunks, red brick etc.? Under certain light and weather conditions its possible for leaves to be light mint, trunks yellowish gray, bricks purple or thousands of other hues. I try hard to paint what I see, not what I know. Is the color unified? By that I mean, does it look like it all came from the same world? Does it have a prevailing look or feel to it, or is it all across the board, with no coherency?

With these evaluations and corrections made, I am actually ready to do the painting. I know I've made it sound like a lot of work up to now, but with practice and a little experience you'll be able to get to this point in the process in about 10 or 15 minutes or less. And that's time very well spent, time that you would normally use changing, searching, scraping, wondering, guessing. Your eye is familiar with the scene. You have a plan and know how to do a passage. You already have value & color notes as a guide. Your canvas is lubricated, you have paint on your clothes and face. Most importantly, you are loosened up, ready to take some risks and ready to go.

LAYER 4: THE FINISH

"I almost always do everything better the second time around"

With the Dress Rehearsal done, I am now ready to do the painting. Using everything I have down as a guide, I will repaint the entire painting. Nothing I have in my ten minute drawing and lay-in will remain in the finished piece, I will cover it with a new skin. But before beginning layer 4, I do two quick things. First I get an image in my mind of what I want the finished painting to look like. This will subconsciously affect everything I do. Secondly, I take a minute to paint the painting in my head before ever laying brush to canvas. This exercise helps me think through problem areas and the order I'm going to do things. This is important if I want an effortless looking painting which I believe is essential to the plein-air look. With this exercise done, I am now ready for the final layer.

As I work I try and lose myself in the process, not worrying about the end result, just getting the immediate passage done as best I can, then the next, etc. I start with the distant elements. Because of the way objects and forms overlap as they get closer, I tend

to paint distance to foreground. It's also easier to control my edges. I try to describe the physical nature of that shape by adding the variety, the warms and cools and lights and darks, but trying very hard to not destroy the unity or wholeness of that shape by adding too much variety. Also, as I paint I try and have fun with it. The viewer will feel this fun, just as they'll feel the drudgery - if that's how I'm feeling. I apply the paint loose and free, showing the tool marks. I want it to look fresh, effortless, like I've painted it for the first time.

Except when softening an edge, I try to never touch the brush to canvas without applying paint. One of the common mistakes beginners make is putting the paint on then endlessly brushing it around till they've brushed the vitality and freshness out of it. Put it on and leave it alone. If it isn't right, put more on top of it. Don't spare the paint. I keep the paint thin in the shadows and thicker in the lights. Thin shadows are more luminous and alive, creating more depth and a feeling of light.

As I paint I try to remember to employ the principles I teach in my workshops. Such as:

~ Atmospheric perspective where things get lighter and cooler as they recede into the distance

~ Contrast is reduced in the distance. Lights remain about the same and darks get lighter.

~ Keep a warm sunlit side to all forms because of the warm nature of sunlight

~ Keep a cool shadow side to all forms because of the blue sky and surrounding foliage, ground etc.

~ Establish a center of interest and how things appear in the periphery of vision. This will help me paint the painting as the eye sees, not as the camera sees. I want my paintings to look like paintings, not photographs.

I set my pallet up the same way every time I paint. It's like keys on a piano, the notes have to be in the same spot for speed and efficiency. I lay the paint out chromatically, that is the order we see color when light is bent through a prism. From left to right across the top: Titanium White, Lemon Yellow, Cad Yellow Light, Cad Orange, Cad Red,

Alizarin Crimson, Ultra Marine Blue, Prussian Green and a small dab of Ivory Black. This is basically a Turn-of-the-Century landscape painters pallet of a warm and cool of each primary. Down the right side I may put a few colors that make sense to the scene I'm painting. However, great paintings can be done with a far more limited pallet like white, cad yellow, cad red and ultra marine blue. I use this pallet in my workshops and students are amazed at how versatile it is.

I try and be aware of my equipment. Are my brushes clean and in good condition? Am I painting with the biggest brush possible to get the job done? This will make mixing faster and easier and create unity in my color and values as well as give me a richer surface quality. Am I managing the paint puddles on my pallet in a logical way? Or is it mud? If it is, scrape it down. Do I have the most important piece of equipment...a roll of clean paper towels?

I pay attention to the edges. There's a scale of edges just as there is a scale of values. Squinting down and looking at the center of interest I can see how the edges look. Some are hard, some are soft, some are softer yet and some lost all together. There's no formula to edges, but generally speaking those facing the light are soft and those turned away are hard. Also I'm sensitive to the physical characteristics of what I'm portraying, hair, foliage, flesh, rocks etc. all feel different and have different edges.

At this point my eye should be pretty stale. I start relying on my mirror to give me a fresher viewpoint. I'm also not comparing the painting to nature so much as I'm just judging it esthetically. Is it abstractly pleasing? If not, what will help it? Does it look like art, or just a boring record of facts?

With the final work done, I usually snap a couple of photos of the scene. One exposed normally and one over exposed about one stop for shadow detail. I may also shoot one under exposed for highlight detail and a close-up of something that I may want to refine in the studio. At this point, I don't judge the work too much. I put it away and clean-up. A day or month later will tell me so much more. I'm always surprised at how pleased or

disappointed I am after not seeing my work for awhile. With a fresh, objective eye, I can do clean-up and modifications in the studio. But I must BE CAREFUL. I have ruined more paintings afterwards in the studio by overworking them. The best plein-air paintings I've done are the ones I finished in the field.

I hope this write-up serves you well. It is not original. It is a distillation of what I learned in Atelier training that I've adapted to outdoor painting, older art instruction books I've read, workshops I have taken, other painters I've known and twenty years of painting experience. I hope it gives back to you a little of the joy that I have received from outdoor painting.

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