

A GUIDE TO *PLEIN AIR* PAINTING ©

by

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INTRODUCTION

The term *plein air* for our purposes means to paint outdoors, but is not limited to painting only. It also encompasses sketching and pastel work outdoors. The criteria is therefore to spend time outdoors facing your subject and recording it with your materials. You do not have to complete a painting outdoors (*alla prima*). The beauty of painting outdoors is that your view of the subject matter is enhanced by many factors, such as an improved perspective, sounds, smells, weather conditions and the overall “being in the moment” feeling that is difficult to experience in a studio.

THE BIG IDEA

I have been painting for many years, but not always with a *plein air* painter's heart! Some years ago I had occasion to view paintings by other plein air artists. What struck me was that the paintings, although small in size, had a brilliance and attractiveness that I had been seeking in my own work. I loved the thick expressive paint and brushstrokes as well. Almost at that first moment I realised that this was the way for me. Before this epiphany I had been painting in a haphazard manner without real feeling. I certainly enjoyed what I was doing, but plein air added the passion that had been missing. I had also been prejudiced against smaller format painting. This meant that I had to spend long periods in the studio with the risk that I would overwork a large canvas and become disheartened. However with a plein air approach a small painting can be the base for a larger work and still retain the sense of intuitiveness that gave the small painting its life.

In short painting plein air will provide an immediacy, spontaneity and expressiveness that may have been lacking in your work. This enhanced painting will in turn provide interest and enduring pleasure to viewers. I am not suggesting that a plein air painting will automatically be good. There are techniques and approaches to follow, which I will hopefully be able to pass on in these notes and demonstrations.

All that you need is to keep an open mind, be patient and have FUN!

PLEIN AIR KIT

As always there tools and materials that you will need to paint pleasurably outdoors. I will highlight what I consider essential then also include nice-to-have items.

1. Paint

When painting outdoors there is little time to haul out a full range of tube colours. It is unnecessary and is a distraction. I only use a limited palette consisting of: titanium white; cadmium yellow light; cadmium red light; ultramarine blue; burnt sienna; yellow ochre and madder/alizarin crimson. Both the burnt sienna and yellow ochre can be mixed with the primaries above, but they are convenient to have.

I use Maimeri paints as I find their bigger tubes and quality just much better. Their pricing is also competitive.

2. Brushes

It is essential that you do not fiddle with small brushes. It is frustrating and will not enhance your painting. We will focus on larger brushes and as few as possible. I use Raphael's Paris Classic bristle brushes. They do cost more, but it is worth it to avoid nasty bristles falling out and other problems with cheap brushes. They are also long lasting.

You will need sizes: 6 and 10 short flats (brights). If you can add a size 12 all the better.

3. **Easels:** there are a number of appropriate easels. You can go for the classic French easel, which incorporates a paint box. This type of easel will do nicely, but you may prefer something lighter and compact. If I had to choose one little easel that does all I need then it would be a aluminium field easel. Light, compact with telescopic legs – it will do all you need at a good price too.

4. **Palette:** I use a tear-off paper palette. They last a long time and are easy to dispose of plus they save time by not having to clean them off. They are also light. Other options are the wooden or plastic type that have to be cleaned off.

5. **Accessories:** As I am painting outdoors I want as little to carry as possible. Therefore I limit the accessories to: 1 x palette knife; 1 x bottle Maimeri eco-medium; a roll of paper towel; plastic bag for rubbish; jar for brush cleaning; paintbox

6. **Comfort Items:** sunblock; a hat; umbrella; small tarpaulin; folding chair; drinking water; snacks (depending on how long you will be away); cell phone
7. **Record the Scene:** camera; notebook/sketch book
8. **Wet Painting Carrier:** these are essentially a slotted box into which you can drop your wet board and carry it home without damaging your work. Expensive ones can be purchased, but it is easy enough to make them using wood, mdf and even cardboard. It is worth the trouble!

9. **A Bag to carry it all!** A rucksack will take all the above items and make your life simpler. Ideally it will be one of those that has a pull-out handle and wheels.

The list can go on and you will adapt to your needs. The above is ample and I have made do with less on short trips. It is worth remembering that you can paint two paintings within an hour so it may not be necessary to pack the kitchen sink! However for longer trips you can revisit the list.

The Painting Process:

I am jumping ahead and concentrating on practical matters once you are out in the field. There is much academic detail that will be dealt with separately such as composition, perspective; colour theory and other formal elements. All of these must be accepted as part of the following process.

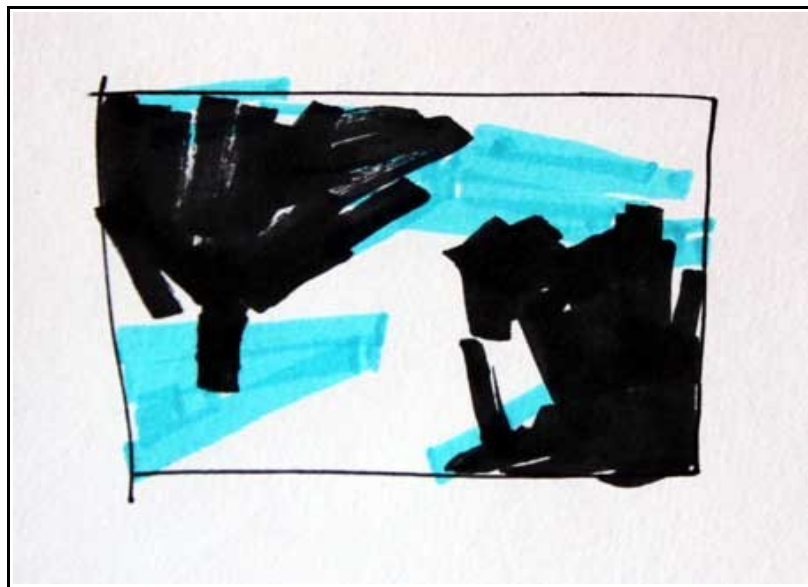
1. ASSESSMENT OF THE SCENE:

A potential landscape must be assessed with a critical eye before a paint tube is opened. In truth the success of the painting depends considerably on your assessment of a scene at the very beginning. It is at this point that all your experience with composition comes into play. As your experience grows this will become an intuitive process. Besides a naturally attractive scene I always look for elements that will catch the eye, draw the eye into the scene and hold the viewer's interest. Perhaps the most critical element is that of **Light and Dark**. I will refer to this as L&D. This element is broken down into values of light and dark, but at this early stage we are just looking for the very basic L&D elements. Think black and white only!

Open your sketch book and draw a small landscape shaped block about four by two centimetres. This is your L&D canvas. Take a dark pencil or even better a black felt tip pen and block in the most prominent dark elements in the scene. Leave out everything in between black and white. You will notice that there is now two values – black and white.



Reference photo for *"the blue door"*



Light and Dark Value study

I have used a black and a blue felt tip marker. The blue was to show a mid-value area. However the first area drawn is the black shapes. If nothing else it is these black shapes that will go onto the canvas first as my dark areas.

Prepare:

From your initial value drawing you can get an idea of where your focal point will be and movement around the painting. The driveway and receding wall leads the eye into the painting towards the focal point – the blue door. It is important to record the scene with a camera for further reference. It may not be possible to complete the painting in one sitting so the photo will be a good reference point. You can make a more detailed sketch using pencil or charcoal provided that you stick to main shapes and not content. Remember that we are concerned with shape and proportion, mood and values in this preparatory phase.

TIME TO PAINT!

Make sure that your easel is securely placed in position. If it is possible to keep out of the sun then do so. Otherwise if you can use a sun umbrella to shade your palette then use this. Very often I will paint in the sun and will wear sunglasses. This is fine as the paint colours and values on the palette remain consistent with the scene before me.

The Paints:

I will set out my paint starting with white on the left of the palette. The other colours will be on the right of the palette leaving the centre open for mixing. My colours are usually titanium white, cad. Red light, cad. Yellow light, ultramarine and madder. If I have burnt sienna and yellow ochre then I will use them too.

The Paint Surface:

When outdoors I usually use a MDF board primed with artist's oil based primer. I use Maimeri's primer. The board is usually 15 x 20 cm or 30cm x 25cm. Any bigger and it becomes a problem to finish in good time.

Tone:

The primer is white so I prefer to tone the board before painting in the shapes. Toning is a good habit and can make a big difference to your painting. It only takes a moment! Use transparent pigment, which means no white mixed in. Dip your brush into your medium and then mix the soaked brush with some pigment.

In this landscape I have used a yellow and red tone. I find this gives the painting a richer warmth typical to our warm climate. Do not worry about any runs – they will be painted over. Remember the tone is very thin and will dry quickly. The intensity depends on you, the scene and what you are trying to achieve.

If you have an idea of where you are going to paint you may decide to tone your board at home before visiting the scene. However it can be interesting to paint over a slightly wet toned board and certain light effects may happen spontaneously. As can be seen with this example I have used a basic pencil sketch followed by a liner brush with diluted burnt umber.



toned board with basic sketch in pencil and using a liner brush

Darks

Now paint in your darkest dark shapes. Mix your darkest value (for example a dark purple with ultramarine and madder or burnt umber).

Darks play such an important role in painting that I am always looking for strong darks in a scene. Consider the famous masters of the past – Caravaggio, Rembrandt, Degas and many others. Besides their technical skill they made use of light and dark effects to produce impact. Before you can even distinguish details it is the light and dark bands that attract your attention from across the room.



Darks painted in very loosely.

Lights:

Paint the lightest light. Concentrate on getting the value correct. Do not worry about the colour being spot-on at this point as long as this light will remain the lightest point on the painting. All other lights will be duller than this one. I have used titanium white with yellow ochre. Never use pure white.



Lights added

Shadows & Mid-Tones:

Start to bring in shadows and place them with bold strokes. They can be refined later.

Here I have started to put in shadows then the first colour notes using mid-tones.

I have an idea where the darks, lights and the colour values that will be used. From this point on it becomes an intuitive process of evaluation, correction and application of more refined colour notes.



A good start with main values and tones established.

All areas of the board have something going on from where you can build up layers.

ENERGY AND GENEROSITY:

I would rather have a painting that shows energy and generous paint application over a technically correct work that lacks these elements. Once your basics are in place you must aim to paint with speed, care and passion. All this sounds like a lot of mental work (it is) but if you follow these guidelines you will not have time to fiddle with details and stew over little bits here and there. This is where the large brush, limited palette and generous amounts of paint all contribute to a painting that delights the eyes with texture and colour.



Refine, evaluate, correct and apply!



Re-establish darks



The Blue Door

Refine. Work on negative spaces in tree.

Add colour notes and points of interest. Complete.

There is much to be gained from quick outdoor studies. Some will not work out and others will be good. A few will stagger you with their spontaneous and delightful energy. The point to stress is that you must aim for quantity! **There is no substitute for time with the brush.** No amount of reading will give you a confident brushstroke.

The time spent on these small works will save you time and paint when you work on a larger version in your studio. Although they will not be exactly the same there will be a convincing composition, proportion and colour harmony.

Learn by doing. Over time you will see quick improvement then a period of doldrums before the next growth phase. Your own style will develop naturally.

I hope this demonstration gives you an insight into a method that can also work for you. Adapt and experiment as you develop your own preferred method. Most important is to enjoy the process – painting is all about the journey!