

Plein Air Painting Workshop – Handout

Basic Procedures - Pastel

There are many ways of making a pastel painting, but here is the way I do it. This technique is especially applicable to working outdoors.

Materials:

- UArt sanded paper (400 or 500 grit)
- Full set of hard pastels [either Faber-Castell Polychromos (120-pc), Prismacolor NuPastels (96-pc) or Cretacolor Pastels Carré (72-pc)]
- Selection of soft pastels (Mount Vision, Sennelier, Schmincke, etc.)
- Small bristle brush with Gamsol or rubbing alcohol
- Backboard, masking tape

Procedure (underpainting - 30 minutes, total time - 2 hours):

1. Tape paper on all 4 sides to the backboard.
2. Use a viewfinder to find your composition.
3. Identify 4-6 major value masses (use only 3 or 4 well-separated values)
4. Pick out a limited palette of hard pastels. Each of your major value masses will have an average color and value. For each mass, find a stick that comes closest to matching that average value and color. MAKE YOUR "BEST GUESS."
5. Lightly sketch in the composition with a mid-value hard pastel from your limited palette.
6. Block in each mass with stick that was selected for it. Vary the strokes and the colors to add interest. Keep your edges soft.
7. Select "adjustment" pastels for the masses. You may find that the dark purple you chose wasn't the exact color you needed, but you may also need a light blue to "adjust" the color.
8. If you are using the white paper and want to fill in "holes," wet your brush with solvent and work the pastel into the paper for each mass. Start with the light masses first. Rinse your brush well between masses to avoid muddying the painting. Let this underpainting dry. (Skip this step if working dry.)
9. ADJUST YOUR "BEST GUESS" FROM STEP 4. Go back with both the original and "adjustment" pastels from your limited palette and redefine your shapes and lines and begin to adjust color and value.
10. Find and place the extremes of your scene -- the lightest light, the darkest dark, the richest color, the sharpest edge. Only if you must, move beyond your limited palette to your full set of hard pastels. You may also use your softest pastels, if you can't find what you need among your hard ones.
11. Continue to work the painting, remembering to:
 - a. Work from dark to light;
 - b. Work from large to small, refining each of your value masses into smaller and smaller pieces and taking care to not change the value too much within each mass; and
 - c. Work from hard to soft, remembering that you should use the softest pastels for accents.
(Sometimes I never even open my box of soft pastels, but use the hard pastels exclusively!)
12. Continue until you're satisfied with the level of detail and "finish."

Basic Procedures - Oil

There are many ways of making an oil painting, but here is the way I do it. This technique is especially applicable to working outdoors. It is a wet-in-wet, *alla prima* style.

Materials:

- Gessoed hardboard panel (5x7 on up to 12x16; 1/8") - You can also stretched canvas but avoid the cheap cardboard panels
- Limited (split-primary) palette: Cad Yellow Lt, Cad Yellow Deep, Cad Red Lt, Permanent Alizarin Crimson, Ultramarine Blue, Cerulean Blue Hue, Titanium-Zinc White. *Optional:* Raw Umber, Burnt Sienna, Yellow Ochre. I use Gamblin paints.
- Two sets of good hog bristle flats - 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12. Maybe a round or two.
- Small painting knife
- Gamsol for thinning; Gamblin Galkyd Gel for quicker drying or Solvent-Free Gel

Procedure (underpainting - 30 minutes, total time - 2 hours):

1. If the gessoed panel is too absorbent, first brush in a thin layer of color thinned with Gamsol (keeps ground from sucking oil out of the paint and gives you better "flow")
2. Use a viewfinder to find your composition.
3. Identify 4 -6 major value masses.
4. Sketch in the outlines of masses with a thinned warm color (Ultramarine Blue + Cad Red Lt)
5. As you follow the next steps, try to keep one set of brushes for warm colors only and the second set for cool colors only. This will help you keep your color pure.
6. Using your largest brushes, block in each mass with an approximation of its average color and value. MAKE YOUR "BEST GUESS." Keep the paint thin -- almost like a wash in light areas, darker but still thin paint in dark areas. Make sure you get the darks dark enough right off. (Aliz Crimson/Phthalo Green make a nice dark.) If the sky is very light, block it in first when your brush is still clean. Keep your edges soft.
7. Overall, go for rich color rather than grays, and keep the paint thin and transparent. Do not use white (yet).
8. Find and place the extremes of your scene -- the lightest light, the darkest dark, the richest color, the sharpest edge.
9. Now adjust color properties of each shape. ADJUST YOUR "BEST GUESS." It's okay to use white now. (But remember that white will cool and gray color.).
10. As you work the painting all over, keep using your biggest brushes until you absolutely need to move to smaller brush.
11. Continue until you're satisfied with the level of detail and "finish."

Special Note for Acrylic Painters: Acrylics dry fast outdoors. Make sure you are prepared to deal with fast-drying conditions. Consider using a Sta-Wet Palette, retarder and mister. Or, try the new, slower-drying acrylics such as Golden Open or Atelier Interactive.

Purpose in Plein Air

It's helpful to have a goal when you go out to paint. Some options:

1. Become familiar with a new landscape
2. Gather reference material for the studio
3. Work on a skill or explore a problem (e.g. with seeing color temperature relationships)
4. Create a finished painting (always the most difficult goal)

Principals to Capturing the Landscape Quickly & Accurately

Before you paint:

1. FIND a scene that has BIG shapes and BIG contrasts and (if possible) RICH color
2. SQUINT
3. LOOK at the BIG SHAPES
4. LOOK at the BIG CONTRASTS
5. See FOUR distinct VALUES
6. MATCH the four values by pre-mixing paint or pre-picking pastels

As you paint:

1. OBSERVE, ANALYZE and ONLY then paint
2. NOTE your darkest dark, your lightest light, your richest color, your sharpest contrast
3. Work from BIG to SMALL
4. Work from DARK to LIGHT
5. Work from THIN to THICK
6. WATCH your EDGES -- should they be soft or hard?
7. STICK with the FOUR values as you paint
8. CAPTURE THE ESSENTIALS in 30 minutes
9. Watch your strokes - SCULPT!

How to Paint - Not Draw

Work on shape properties and relationships only:

1. Loosely sketch in large, simple shapes
2. Loosely block in average color and value of each shape ("BEST GUESS")
3. Compare and adjust relationships between shapes: value, hue, chroma, shape
4. Note major dark accents and major light highlights
5. Add color variations (not value, but hue and chroma only) within each shape (ADJUST YOUR "BEST GUESS")
6. Refine shape edges as needed (e.g. sky holes, value shifts at edge to soften, negative space adjustments).
7. Finish with working in the third dimension and adding surface texture with thicker paint or pastel

Detail just "seems to happen" because the hand is not a machine, and not all strokes are as precise and unerring as we would like.

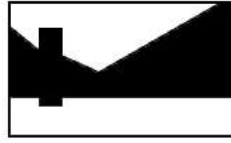
Plein Air Tips

1. **Strip down your gear.** You don't need all your studio equipment and materials. Get it to the minimum that will still allow you to accomplish your goal. Instead of 300 pastels, take 45; instead of 12 tubes of paint, take 7—or even just the three primaries! Be comfortable with your equipment so you're not fighting it *and* the bugs, the sun and the wind.
2. **Make a goal for the day.** Having a goal will help your technique advance. Lousy with reflected light in shadowed areas? Find it hard to make your rocks look real? Work on some small thing that you are weak in.
3. **Pick a spot to paint and stay there.** You can waste a lot of good daylight and energy wandering around looking for a place to paint. Your best bet is to paint in a place you've been in before. At the very least, put your gear down before you start looking!
4. **Have the same light on your canvas and your palette.** Don't have your canvas in full sunlight and your paint palette in shadow; it will be impossible to mix colors correctly. Best is to have both in shadow. But if you must work in full sun, make sure the sun is on both the canvas and the palette.
5. **Crop your scene.** With nature 360° around you, you will be overwhelmed and ultimately frustrated. Use a camera viewfinder or a composing tool to select your scene before you paint.
6. **Work small.** Unless you plan to come back to the scene the next day to finish a painting, work small. Realistically, a 9x12 or smaller is all you can finish in a two-hour session. (Small is also easier to tote!) If you plan to work large (16x20 or bigger), be prepared. Some painters paint more quickly and can work on a larger surface.
7. **Work quickly.** Two hours is the most time you have before the light changes significantly, altering shapes and values and even color. (Again, you could go back the next day at the same time of day and under the same weather conditions to continue an unfinished piece. Or, finish up in the studio from memory and with reference material.)
8. **Capture temperature contrasts.** A realistic sense of lighting is all about correct temperature relationships. Warm light and cool shadow; or, cool light and warm shadow.
9. **Get one thing right.** Rather than try to make a finished painting in the field, try to get just one thing right -- the shape of a rock, the relationship of a tree and the ground. Leave the rest of your painting an accurate but undetailed block-in. (Unless you have time to go further.)
10. **Move on!** When you're finished with one painting, move on to the next time. Good weather days and good "energy" days rarely coincide. Take advantage of them!
11. **Painting turned out badly?** Scrape it, unless you really want to analyze it back in the studio. Studio analysis can be helpful, but make sure you then toss the painting.

Different Approaches to Interpreting Landscape Values

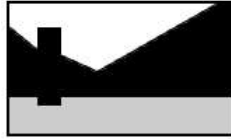
1. **2-Value Shape** (notan)

- a. Light
- b. Shadow



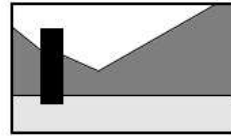
2. **3-Value Shape**

- a. Light
- b. "Transition Value"
- c. Shadow



3. **4-Value Shape** (Carlson's idea)

- a. Lightest Light
- b. Mid-value Light
- c. Mid-value Dark
- d. Darkest Dark



Four values is all you really need to describe the landscape. Sometimes you can do with just three. Shoot for contrast first; you can also soften the contrast later.

Dominance & Contrasting Pairs

Always think of dominance when you are building a painting. There are many types of contrasting pairs, and in each pair, one member should be dominant. For example, a painting may be a mostly light, mostly warm, mostly dull-colored piece.

In the list below, the first three are most important with landscapes.

1. Value (light/dark) - IMPORTANT for landscapes
2. Temperature (warm/cool) - IMPORTANT for landscapes
3. Chroma (rich/dull) - IMPORTANT for landscapes
4. Hue (think of complementary pairs such as red/green)
5. Brushwork contrasts (think of thick/thin paint, opaque/transparent passages, hard/soft edges)

When I go into the field, I ask myself:

- **What will be the dominant value?** Will this be a dark, moody tonalist piece? Will it be a bright, impressionistic piece?
- **What will be the dominant temperature?** Will this be a warm painting or a cool one?
- **Will rich or dull colors dominate?** Dull color is typically dominate in the landscape; unless you are painting gardens or man-made structures, rich color will always be an accent.
- **What will be the dominant color?** Will the piece be mostly monochromatic and full of greens? Or will you use a limited palette of one primary and the split complements that go with it? (Such as blue predominating with touches of yellow-orange and orange-red.)

Finding Color Harmony

Color harmony is more complex than just dominance. It's also about the little bits and pieces that work together with those large chunks that dominate a painting. In the field, I ask myself:

- **What is the dominant color?** Perhaps today, cool colors dominate and most especially the violets of the trees, snow and sky.
- **What is the subdominant color?** That is, what takes up the next largest share of the "canvas." Perhaps with the violets, I find a large amount of cool greens.
- **Is there a bit of contrasting color?** Maybe to go with those cool greens and cool violets, I can find a bit of a complementary color, such as orange.

*****It's helpful to have a color wheel if you're uncertain of complements.*****

I find that nature has its own beautiful color harmony going, no matter where I am or what time of day or the location. Sunlight, whether filtered through clouds or falling directly on the landscape, adds the color and temperature of its light to everything in light. The air itself also modulates a harmony, softly removing yellows and reds as distance increases. I don't need to think about harmony so much as just observe the harmony that is already there.

Sometimes, it's helpful to include a unifying color. This will be a color that helps pull all the contrasting colors (dominant, subdominant, contrasting) together. Toning the canvas (for oil) or selecting a colored paper (for pastel) helps. I often will tone a canvas with Indian Yellow to start off with a nice, warm note, since I tend to paint with a cooler palette.

Color Harmonies

- Monochromatic
- Analogous colors with a touch of complement(s)
- Monochromatic with touch of split complements
- Warm colors with a touch of cool
- Cool colors with a touch of warm

Using a monochromatic underpainting or a toned surface will automatically create color harmony

To Match Any Color

- Identify the base color
- Identify the temperature
- Identify the intensity
- Identify the value
- Compare the color to others nearby

About Black

Gamblin's Chromatic Black lets me to and/or darken a color without changing hue. You can certainly grey and darken a color by adding a complement, but this also changes the hue - which may not be your intent. You can also mix your own black by mixing two complements, but the Chromatic Black saves time and is a perfectly neutral black. (Raw umber is also a good greyer.) With pastel, I may use a warm or cool neutral grey to accomplish the same.

Putting Distance in Your Landscape

We start with the landscape as a flat abstraction. We will need to create a sense of depth to make it a convincing picture for the viewer.

Black and white tools:

- Overlapping of objects
- Decreasing size of objects
- Softening of edges
- Lowering of contrast (lightening of darks)

Color tools:

- Colors become greyer in the distance
- Colors become cooler in the distance (not necessarily bluer!)

Useful Resources for the Plein Air Painter

My books, [Beautiful Landscape Painting Outdoors: Mastering Plein Air](#), [Backpacker Painting: Outdoors with Oil & Pastel](#) and [Outdoor Study to Studio: Take Your Plein Air Paintings to the Next Level](#), have lots of information plus demonstrations. (Order from Amazon - www.amazon.com/author/johnson).

Also, please check out my many videos at ArtistsNetwork.tv.

[My Substack blog and archives](#) feature lots of technical information. You can also see the most recent paintings and demonstrations there. Click on the link on my website or go directly to <https://mchesleyjohnson.substack.com>. My book, Beautiful Landscape Painting Outdoors: Mastering Plein Air, has LOTS of information for both beginners and advanced painters. (Order from <https://www.amazon.com/author/johnson>).