

Landscape Painting in the Field with Brad Holt

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This is a discussion of materials and techniques for plein air oil painting. Painting on location can be a humbling experience even for seasoned studio artists. Most artists will encounter difficulties when they first begin painting on location. They will often go through a period of despair in which they will even question their talent and vocation. Seldom will they bring home work that they are proud of. This is normal.

If you find yourself frustrated with your early attempts to paint in the field, my advice is to have faith in yourself. Give yourself some time. Plein air painting is hard to do well. It takes time and effort. The elements will fight you. The light will constantly change. It is harder to judge values outdoors, than it is in the studio. The very vastness of the world before you can be overwhelming. Those who have become used to painting from photo references can find it tough to shift gears and work from life. We all go through this. There are no shortcuts. Don't even begin to judge yourself until you have twenty five or thirty starts under your belt. Above all, maintain a sense of perspective. Remember that you are outdoors, in a beautiful place, engaging in one of your favorite pastimes. Relax. Have fun.

Fighting your equipment, however, can take the joy out of the plein air experience. A good Pochade box, and a sturdy tripod are essential. It would be worthwhile to join a painting group so you can go to the field with other artists and see the gear that they are using. This can help you decide what sort of set-up you want to invest in. Take your time, and be prepared to spend some money. Good gear is expensive, but buying good gear after buying and rejecting bad gear, is worse! Gear that is sturdy, lightweight, easy to pack, and easy to set up, pays you back in endless dividends of serenity---and serenity fosters good art. This goes for paint, brushes, and supports as well. A miserly attitude towards any of these essential things will bring misfortune in the field.

Materials

Materials for plein air painting are divided into the items necessary for painting, and the items necessary for making you a happy camper. Essentials for painting are:

- Pochade Box, or French Easel
- Tripod, Heavy duty, with a ball joint.
- Paints, Brushes, Palette knives, Mediums, and Panels
- Solvent in a sealable container.
- Viewfinder. Sketchbook, Drawing supplies
- Paper Towels or Rags, and a Garbage Bag.
- Camera.
- A good pack, in which it all fits without struggle.

An Artist's Parasol is optional. I find that I am always fighting with it when the wind comes up, and when *doesn't* the wind come up? I also recommend that artists get used to painting both in shade and in full sun. Having experience with a range of lighting conditions seems to help in having better control over your values, and frankly, value management is half the battle in the field.

Items necessary for making one a happy camper are:

- Proper clothing, Hat, Good Shoes, No Bright Colors.
- Water, Food.
- Sunscreen, Bug Spray.

This is just common sense stuff. If you take medicine, have some with you. If you get headaches, bring some aspirin. Try to anticipate what you will need to be comfortable, and pack it with you---within reason.

Palette

I generally preach the gospel of the limited palette. The Hair-Shirt version of this would be the three primaries, and white. I have seen amazing work done with just such an austere palette. The drawback to it is that it is very difficult to avoid muddiness. The more a color is mixed, the less intense it will be. The advantage to a limited palette, is that with experience, the artist learns to mix color almost unconsciously and instinctively, much as the musician allows muscle memory to give him fluidity with his instrument. So, to husband our advantages and mitigate our liabilities, I recommend that we opt for a modified limited palette, which consists of a warm and a cool of the three primaries, plus white, and few extra colors that I have found to be shortcuts toward specific ends.

To wit, my palette consists of:

- Ultramarine Blue
- Prussian Blue
- Cad. Yellow Pale
- Cad. Yellow Medium
- Alizarin Crimson
- Cad. Red Light
- Titanium White

I use one earth color, and I use it a lot:

Raw Umber

In addition, I have found that a shortcut to neutralizing blue is Cadmium Orange. It can also add the right touch of warmth in raking light situations. Cobalt blue is almost always the right choice for desert skies. I have also found it to be very handy in mixing the various hues of sagebrush. You can achieve a rich chromatic black by mixing Raw Umber with Ultramarine. Beautiful Violets can be created with admixtures of Ultramarine and Alizarin Crimson. Quinacridone Red may also be used. There isn't a green I can't make with Prussian Blue, and one of the Yellows. Keeping Green under control is a constant battle in outdoor painting. One can make a good start by always mixing greens.

I find that I am constantly re-evaluating my philosophy and approach with regard to the palette. I've had some success experimenting with some of the Gamblin Radiant colors, which are a high chroma tint of the basic colors. What I'm saying is to keep an open mind. Watch what others are using, and try out new things. At the very least it makes you more experienced, which is the very key to good color mixing.

I always mix color with a brush. I see people laboriously mixing neat little color piles with a palette knife, and I despair that they will ever get anything on canvas before the light has completely changed. Painting in the field is a race against the sun. The whole philosophy is to get it down quickly, before the light changes. This is one of the reasons that we use small panels: It is difficult to cover a large support in a timely fashion. The artist will find through practice, a personal methodology to color mixing. I am a pragmatist on the matter: if it works for you, and you are achieving good results, then you are correct. For those who struggle with this aspect of the craft of opaque painting, I would suggest a few points. First, always lay your colors out in the same position, according to a logic that works for you. Think of your palette as a *color board*, much as the musician might have a fret-board or a keyboard. Second, mix your color as you need it. Artists who are used to pre-mixing a palette full of color puddles might struggle with this, but there is a very practical reason for it.

In field conditions, especially with the use of mediums that speed drying, color puddles can quickly get too tacky. Plein air painting demands constant variation in value and temperature in portions of a color pile anyway. This creates variation and nuance in the work. A palette full of inappropriate color puddles, with little left over room for new mixes can be frustrating indeed! Third, color piles should be mixed in a more generous amount than you think you need, as portions will inevitably get modified. Parsimonious color mixing leads to the *starved brush* look in your work. Oil paint may be expensive to the wallet, but starved brush paintings incur a debt to the soul. Fourth, remember that using white to increase value results in a loss of intensity. Brightening things is a matter of intensity as well as value. Beware the path of white! That way lies chalkiness and madness!

The use of mediums is a personal thing which each artist has to explore for himself. My preference is to use a Liquin gel medium mixed with thinner. The amount of thinner varies according to the heat of the day. Liquin increases the speed of drying, and it seems to facilitate wet over wet brushwork. On a hot day, in direct sun, it can get too tacky too quickly--- so exercise caution. An unwashed brush left unattended can get ruined in a hurry. At such times one might use odorless mineral spirits alone, in place of a medium, though this can lead to a dull matte surface quality. Remember to try and make each layer fatter than the layer beneath it. As with the palette, I would suggest being open to changing your approach. If you don't use mediums, go ahead and try it. Or try changing the type of medium you use. Experiment with stiffer or looser mixtures. The more familiar you are with the toolbox at your disposal, the more you can concentrate on the art, and let the craft take care of itself.

Brushes

I use flats almost exclusively. Why purchase filberts when your flats will turn into them through wear? I begin a painting with natural bristle flats, and then graduate to artificial flats in the finishing passes. The most useful sizes are 12, 10, 8, and 6. I often chastise students for not using a large enough brush. The general rule is that your painting will look less forced or busy if you use the largest brush you can get away with for that which you are trying to achieve. The smaller brushes may be used to good effect in the final phases of the painting process. The bold strokes of a large brush can often have such a charming calligraphy, that such passages may be profitably left to add a certain authenticity and candor to the final look of the painting. An artist needs to exercise some discipline to avoid laboring such passages with the ministrations of too small a brush. The old adage is that the first stroke is alive, the second is tired, and the third is dead. Were this strictly true there would be no finished paintings. But I would find such a world preferable to the universe of over-finished paintings that we often seem to find ourselves in. Artists will find that their work can benefit when brushes are wielded with a certain delicacy and reserve: Muddiness and lifelessness are the wages of an over-active brush.

Panels

I do not like to paint on canvas, unless it is a very smooth linen. The uniform tooth of traditional canvas panels is one of the worst mud-makers that students fall into. You can improve a canvas panel by spackling on more gesso with a gesso knife. I prefer to make my own panels with untempered masonite. I give them a couple of coats of gesso with a large brush, and then a final coat with a gesso knife. With more experience, the rougher surfaces can be profitably employed. There are also a number of papers which have been commercially prepared for use with oil paint. I enjoy painting on a such a paper. The texture is nice. The tradition in plein air painting is to work small. I seldom paint larger than 12x16" in the field. 9x12" is an ideal size for plein air work. It is small enough to finish before one is tempted into chasing the light, but large enough to have some presence. 6x8" is a good size for making a quick field study to inform a planned studio piece. It is a good idea to carry a wet panel in a panel carrier. There are many kinds available commercially.

Approach

A digression on the matter of subject is appropriate here. I am surprised at how often aspiring artists will avoid certain subjects because they consider the scene to be *too hard!* Take courage! Everything in nature is paint-able. If you think that Bryce Canyon is too hard to paint, then I would exhort you to go to Sunset Point with all your gear, set up in front of God and everybody, and engage in a little hand-to-brush combat with your demons! *We are*, in the words of the Bard, *but warriors for the working day*. But the battle is within, and the enemies we must vanquish are our own doubts and fears. So take heart, my gentle comrades, and stand resolute before the thorniest of subjects. The only person you can fail is yourself.

Plein Air is a French term for open air painting. Another connotation of the term *plain*, is without subterfuge. Straight forward. Guileless. True. I like this meaning, because it implies a certain fidelity to the visual world before us. But it can be counterproductive to place too much emphasis on this approach because it is necessary to simplify the visual information we are seeing, if we want to paint it successfully. In order to paint outdoors on location, we need to adjust the way we see the world. We are not painting *things*. We are painting abstract *color-values*. To get in the habit of this we need to stop our mental labeling of the visual features that we are seeing, as often as we can. I have gotten so much in this habit that when a bystander remarks that they "Like my clouds", it is all I can do to avoid saying: "Those are not clouds, they are color-values."

An additional implication of this habit of mind is the devaluation of subject. This is a general trend in the world of art. It has been one of the prime motives in painting since the beginning of the twentieth century. With regard to representational landscape painting it means that we grow as artists when we get beyond *likeness* to give a visual record of our confidence and *intentionality*. We stop trying to do portraits of particular places, and instead let the landscape aid us in creating a good painting, whether or not it is a perfect representation of the scene. The world is full of really good cameras. There is no danger that any portion of the visual world will go unrecorded. The reason for painting is not to show us how the world looks. It is to reveal the spirit and individuality of the artist. In this regard, *what* we paint is less important than *how* we paint it.

The Process

The first thing to do when you have decided what you want to paint, is to get out your camera, and take a few reference shots. Otherwise you will get busy with the painting and forget. I can't count the number of times that I have come home from the field without any photos. It is important because you will often find that a successful plein air piece is the trigger to a larger studio work. The field work provides color and value information that the camera simply cannot match, but the photographic record is necessary for form and detail. The viewing screen of your camera can also help you make decisions about composition. A good viewfinder is also good in this respect, and I will go so far as to draw the main lines of the composition on the surface of the viewfinder, with a marker, to help me avoid proportional errors. One of the most common errors at this point is to crowd the edges of the format by making the center of interest too large. The viewfinder is invaluable in avoiding this pitfall. Some artists will avoid this problem by doing a thumbnail sketch on paper. Either method will help you size the scene properly on your panel.

When you are composing your painting you must wrestle with the lure of pure representation. You need to decide how much fidelity you will pay to the scene before you, and to what extent you will allow it to simply inform an inner vision. At some point in the painting process, an artist must let go of the subject in order to concentrate on the painting itself, as an independent aesthetic artifact. Early on this may manifest as a series of thumbnails, or simply as broad, free, abstract brushstrokes. Often I will execute a quick value study in raw umber. Usually I will usually knock down the white of my panel with a turp wash with a touch of raw umber in it. Then I will do a light sketch of the scene with raw umber and alizarin crimson. Conventional wisdom at this point is to paint your lightest light, and your darkest dark. Dark yes--- with raw umber and ultramarine. But I would counterfeit the lightest light by erasing back to gesso with a rag and some turp. If you put any white on the panel at this point it will pollute every brushstroke that you put over it or next to it. Try to make this value study solid, and a little darker than you might want in

the end, as you will be painting lights on top of it eventually. Remember a general rule that darks go in thinly, and early. It is much easier in oil painting to pull a light stroke over a dark, than dark over light. Partly this is due to the properties of the paint when white is mixed in it. But even on a completely dry painting, dark passages added later in the painting process can be difficult to make natural looking. It's just the way things are.

The value study accomplishes a couple of important things. It provides a unifying tone and hue that can help you to avoid having to overwork successive over-paintings. It also should help you to see very quickly, if the painting is going to work. If a piece does not work as a value study, then it will not work as a painting---no matter how hard you try. Knowing this allows you to cut your losses, wipe it off, and begin again. There is no shame in this. I have seen many times when artists have painted an absolute jewel, after having scraped their first effort.

Next I try to map in my medium color-values with a large brush, and fairly thin paint. As long as there is some medium in the paint mixture, it will set up enough within a few minutes, to take both light and dark passages over it without mixing too much. It is possible to take some dark passages over a lighter area, as long as the paint layer is somewhat set up, and the light is not too light, and the dark is not too dark. Hard core darks should be painted early, and should remain largely unmolested right through to end. You need to observe a certain delicacy in brush handling, when negotiating wet over wet strokes, but achieving some adroitness in this is the heart of good painting. The next step is to paint the overall light areas. Care must be taken when painting these light areas , as many of them may be final passages which remain unaltered to the end of the process. Try to use the largest brush you can get away with, for the size of strokes that you are trying to do. I will always look less forced. Variation in the value and temperature of your color puddle creates nuance and interest in your brush strokes. You may not think that you are painting the final passages, but the end can have a tendency to sneak up unannounced. An artist needs to develop the sensitivity to recognize when it is time to stop. Most of the highlights can also be dispatched at this point, as it takes very little effort to lighten a portion of a paint puddle on your palette to accommodate these final "candy" strokes.

At this point it is a good idea to take a break, puff on your pipe for a bit, go see what everybody else is painting, so that you may return with a fresh eye. You are in the process of painting candy. Do not confuse candy with detail. It may just mean intensifying a passage of color, strengthening a light or dark, or putting a wolfish glint in the eyes of the hero. Most of the detail should have taken care of itself, if you painted sensitively. Adding a welter of tedious detail with small brushes in the final stages is where most paintings jump the shark. In the first place, most artists are simply not patient enough or good enough with brush and oil paint to make every leaf on the tree or every hair on

the bunny rabbit look anything other than forced and trite. In the second place, the eye and mind of the observer craves simplicity--- it screens out detail naturally. To be forced to wallow in it can be jarring. Do yourself, and the art world a favor and opt for the road less traveled, or the canvas less painted, as it were. Leave your viewers relaxed and happy, not exhausted.

Conclusion

Let me end with a few bits of wisdom concerning the art of painting. First, remember to squint often as you look at your subject. Squinting cuts out the superfluous detail, and makes the relative values more apparent. I managed to get a degree in art before I learned that! Second, if you find yourself dabbing at your canvas, because you are lost, and you don't know what to do, put down the brush, step back, and think about what you are doing. Don't pick the brush back up until you have formulated a plan. Third, Get over the idea that everything you paint has to be a masterpiece. You should be prepared to scrape off your canvas at any point, and begin anew. The masterpiece is not on the canvas, it is in your eye, and your hand, and your mind. The point is not to be able to pull off a lucky piece once in a while--- it is to be able to paint good work consistently. Forth, change your perspective often. You can do this physically by looking at your piece upside down. Mentally you can do it by reminding yourself not to label things, and by thinking value over color over form. Fifth, change things up often. Paint still lifes. Paint figures. Paint stuff that moves! Have fun with it and challenge yourself.

Finally, if you want to be a good painter, you have to devote a lot of time to it. I notice that the students who get good are the ones that paint a lot. I mean every day, or at least every other day. The decision to become an artist is not to be made lightly, for it demands that we sacrifice a big portion of our time. *Artist* is a title that we confer upon ourselves, yet it is empty and meaningless until it is conferred upon us by others, because our work has become strong enough to demand attention. I always say that in this life we need to pick the hill that we are willing to die on. In other words, choose a worthwhile path in life, and be willing to stick to it. Painting is just such a path. It is a discipline worthy of a lifetime's commitment. Few pastimes can be as simultaneously frustrating and rewarding. Art is a *big* goal, and it is worthy of a *big* commitment. Now, enough pontificating. Get out there and paint!