

## Why Paint Outside?

There are many reasons to choose to leave the comfort of your warm studio to paint on location. It can be daunting, but very rewarding. Here are a few reasons to ponder:

1. Photos are good reference tools, but are inadequate to use by themselves. The values, colors and perspective can be deceptive in photos, and the temptation can be very strong to copy them outright.
2. Each painting trip is an experience, and that translates onto the canvas.
3. You collect information that you can take back to the studio, complete a painting in a single session or over multiple sessions on location.
4. You start seeing the world in a different way. Compositions, shapes, light, shadows, perspective, things you never noticed before become artistically exciting.
5. Meditation/concentration. I will not say that outside painting is relaxing. I always think it's funny when people approach me and say "That looks so peaceful and relaxing" when inside it feels like a battle to the death. However, the concentration you engage in when painting outdoors is enough to block out all other thoughts. A break from your everyday thoughts and worries can be a sort of meditation.
6. There is no faster way to improve your skills...seriously.
7. It's fun!

## Gear

You need an easel and palette.

The two kinds I use and can recommend are:

Gloucester Easel - [www.takeiteasel.com](http://www.takeiteasel.com)

Coulter System - [www.artboxandpanel.com](http://www.artboxandpanel.com)

There are also many pochade boxes available and widely used by outdoor painters. Some good ones are Strada, Open Box M, Easy L, Alla Prima Pochade. Also, the French fold-out easels like the Mabef have been very popular with outdoor painters for ages.

A good backpack for your gear. I use a Kelty Redwing. It can be challenging to find backpacks wide enough. Definitely take note of the dimensions of your palette/pochade before shopping for a backpack.

Brushes, paper towels, medium, solvent or water, nitrile or reusable nitrile-dipped gloves if you are an oil painter.

Paint - Start with a limited palette - keep it simple! Cadmium red light, Cadmium yellow light, Alizarin, Ultramarine Blue, Titanium white, Burnt Sienna to block in.

Invest in a good pair of comfortable and warm boots, I have a summer and winter pair.

Sun screen, hat, bug spray, rain gear are useful to have in your car.

Always bring water.

## Gear (Cont.)

Be prepared. Nothing derails a painting trip quicker than forgetting things. I still do it sometimes. When I come home from a trip and clean my gear, I put everything back in my bag right away so I don't forget it on my next outing.

## Getting Started

What to paint? Going outside and looking for a scene to paint can be overwhelming. You are confronted with so much visual information, and must edit and prioritize what interests or excites you the most. Here are some ways you can approach the chaos of what's in front of you:

Look for compositions/shapes/values/colors

Look for a clear foreground, middle and background in a scene.

Take note of interesting accents that can direct the eye, ie. fence posts, vegetation, puddles, clouds, etc.

Use a view finder. Your phone cameras make great composition finders. Take pictures and use crop tool to experiment with compositions.

Block in. Keep compositions simple. Only a few shapes and values, especially with smaller panels. A simpler composition makes a more powerful painting.

Identify things that will change in the scene you chose, paint that first.

Move around your canvas while you paint. You will be able to achieve more accurate color and values this way. Quickly scrub in different areas, worry about edges later, or not at all. Painting top to bottom or left to right does not work too well in plein air painting. You are going after an impression, because your time is so limited. That's why plein air paintings seem so fresh and alive.

If you are like me, your painting will look rough for 3/4 of your painting time. It's fine. It's a building and refining process. This makes it a little awkward when people stop to see what you are doing. No need to make excuses if you are worried about their judgement. It's a work in progress.

Do not include unnecessary elements. If it has no purpose in the painting, leave it out.

Move things around at your discretion. Just because a telephone pole is in a certain place in reality, does not mean you have to paint it there if it does not benefit your painting. All of the elements in the scene in front of you are fodder for your painting, to be placed where you want them (within reason). If a scene has to be perfect in nature before you set up to paint, you will never set up to paint.

Paint clouds anywhere you want. You won't have time to copy a cloud perfectly, so just look to them for colors and contrasts against the sky color, then place them where they work best for your composition. If you are at a loss as to what to paint one day, just practice clouds, there is so much information in the sky to observe and practice.

## Getting Started (Cont.)

Don't hesitate to paint challenging scenes. Sometimes I will set up and start a painting and halfway through realize it is too complicated for the time I have, I'm in over my head. At that point, I switch my thinking from trying to achieve a finished painting to editing and simplifying. Also, it can be helpful to turn it into a drawing practice session and focus on the perspective and shapes in front of you. It takes the pressure off, and you get valuable practice in observation, which is really what it's all about.

Self talk during your painting session is key. You know you are in the zone when your thoughts are like the following:

What is my focal point?  
What is the lightest area? How do I make it stand out as the lightest area?  
Where do I want the horizon? Is this painting about the sky or the earth?  
What is the dominant value?  
How do I make this an interesting composition?  
How do I contrast my background and foreground more?  
How do I make a certain thing recede or come forward?  
What can I use to guide the eye around the painting?  
How do I add interest in a certain area (brush strokes, texture, color saturation, contrast)  
What is the value of this area compared to another?  
Do the darks in the background compete with the darks in the foreground?  
Are my edges too sharp? Too soft?  
What is the angle of that roofline?  
What is the negative space between those trees?  
Is this object too close to the edge of my panel?  
Etc.

Be patient and kind to yourself. Your painting won't work out lots of the time, especially in the beginning, but the lessons of every "failed" painting will be internalized and you will be better prepared the next time you are confronted with the same challenge. If I get stumped during a painting, I often comb through art books or images online to find examples of how other painters tackled a certain thing (weather, figures, reflections, whatever.)

And on that point, this is very important, look at as much great art as you can. Get inspired from other artists, you will learn an incredible amount this way. It's not stealing to learn technique from other artists, it's inspiration and learning. All of the old masters did it, too.

## Challenges

Sun - Always wear sunscreen and SPF lip balm and bring water to stay hydrated. I always wear a ball cap year round to keep the sun out of my eyes. Position your easel so your panel/canvas is not in the sun. Your colors will be truer. Winter in my opinion is the best time to paint. No heat, sweat, bugs to deal with, natural areas are often deserted. You can bundle up to stay warm, and winter colors are muted and beautiful.

Bugs - Always use and pack bug spray. We are in a very tick-populated area, keep that in mind and wear long pants with your socks over your pant legs if painting in long grass. I spray down my boots and jeans with permethrin for added protection.

Incoming tide - Keep tide in mind when setting up near the water. I have found myself ankle deep in water more than once.

## Challenges (Cont.)

Rain/snow - also very fun to paint if you protect yourself from the elements. A big umbrella or the tailgate of your car if you have one can help. Again, once you start painting, your mind is occupied and not bothered by slight discomforts. Make sure if you use an umbrella that it is anchored sufficiently, nothing takes you out of the zone like having to constantly adjust equipment or worry about your umbrella and/or easel getting blown away.

Self consciousness - This has been a big obstacle for me, and I still struggle with it sometimes. Worrying about people watching me paint, feeling silly standing outside with my easel. Many artists are introverts, and the thought of putting yourself out there is scary. In all my years plein air painting, I have only had one person react negatively to me, and that's because I was trespassing. People love to see painters. If you are in their town or near their property, they are flattered you find it beautiful enough to paint. Some people like to make suggestions, that's their way of connecting with you. Art crosses all cultural, political and socioeconomic barriers. People will stop and tell you about the area that you are painting. You meet so many people and learn a lot if you open yourself to it. Conversely, if you wish to not engage, that is possible by just being engrossed in your painting. No one will question your concentration.

This may sound cheesy, but things I tell myself when I'm feeling self conscious:

I'm doing something different and unusual in the world today.

I'm going to pretend to be a kid today and just paint for fun.

This will be an adventure.

If I saw a painter in the wild, what would I think?

Van Gogh and Monet did what I'm doing. People thought they were crazy, but who cares about that now?

The most anxious part of this is finding a spot and setting up. You will want to give up and go home so badly! You will give yourself tons of excuses not to paint that day. Here is the truth: Once you set up and put brush to canvas, all insecurities melt away and your focus is on the painting. I have NEVER regretted painting, even when my painting turned out to be an abject failure. Those are actually the best, because that's when you learn the most.

All of that being said, be aware of your surroundings, make sure you are not in anyone's way or trespassing on someone's property, or in a spot where you could get hit by a car. If you are in an isolated location and feel uneasy about your own safety, listen to your gut.

## Other thoughts:

As with most things, the more time and planning you put in on the front end of your painting, the better it will turn out. Take a little more time with your sketch or block-in, and if it does not excite you, wipe it and start over. Don't ever be afraid to wipe big sections or the whole thing to start over. The less precious you can be about your work, the better.

Whether you paint outside, in the studio or do both, paint often, as much as you can. Even if you are in school or have a full-time job, you can find time, and you will thank yourself. It is all cumulative. Challenge yourself to paint at least a little every day for a week, or a month, or a year. You will be amazed at how quickly you progress. A plein air usually takes 2-3 hours, after that the light is totally different. Most people spend that much time watching Netflix or scrolling through social media, why not paint?

### Rules you can break:

Things to keep in mind and use when useful:

Rule of thirds in composition.

Keep light values out of shadow areas.

Sky is almost always lightest value, Ground/water is next lightest, then mountains, then trees/poles/upright shapes.

As things recede in space, they get less saturated, bluer, lighter in value, less defined. It is due to "atmospheric perspective" the particles in the atmosphere filter out other waves of light in the color spectrum.

Sky is often lighter and more yellow and/or pink toward the horizon, darker blue as it goes up.

Clouds are smaller pinker/lavender by the horizon, larger and warmer as they go up.

Many are taught not to use black in painting. I generally don't use black for dark areas or shadows, but I love an Ivory black/cad yellow light mixture for an olive green. Also, black can be used to make interesting grays or to tone down the saturation in color mixtures.

Great books for landscape painting:

Composition of Outdoor Painting, Edgar Payne

Carlson's Guide to Landscape Painting, John Carlson

Last thought: To learn how to paint, the most important things you can do are:

1. Look at as many great paintings as you can.
2. Paint as much as you can.