



Painting in oil is not a requirement for a Plein Air class, but it is what I know best. If you prefer to work in a different medium, I can still offer help and suggestions.

“The overall plan for a Plein Air class is to show how to start.”

I like to use either a dry toned panel (gesso mixed with something like raw umber acrylic paint, pale neutral, value 6 or 7), or an imprimatura, which is raw umber oil paint, burnt sienna, or one of the transparent earth oxides, (Actually any lean color could work, but these lean earth colors have been used to very good effect for hundreds of years.)

Mix a couple of drops of solvent into the oil paint, brush it onto the gessoed or primed panel, and then almost completely wipe it off. What is left is a pale, thin, lean veil of color. This may be left to dry, or may be immediately painted into wet, or used in a wipe-out method. This is a fast way to establish one's basic composition and major shapes.

The benefit of the toned panel or imprimatura is that one begins with a mid-tone, adding darks thinly, and then lights more thickly.

Let the mid color of the panel stand in, for the time being, for all the mid tones. This takes some getting used to, but allows a fast lay-in.

I recommend that you bring two small panels so that you can quickly get a thin, lean composition on one, and then copy this onto the other. (This is a recommendation, not a requirement. We all have different temperaments.) Leave one to dry, and then come back and paint it in a few days. This gives you a real jump start on your next painting; you can arrive on site, and then immediately start making color judgments - the composition is basically laid out. The second wet panel you may paint on right away, knowing that you have a backup.

The Case for Plein Air Painting

We see what we expect to see.

Photographs are read more than seen. Same as reading a book, and one needs to learn to read. Reading pixels is not the same as seeing. The perception of space and color, in nature, is more undefined and complex; it needs to be rendered rather than copied. Judgment is required, not just observation and measurement. Physiological aspects are at play. There is no one-to-one, direct correspondence between what you see, what you paint, and what is there. We humans, have binocular vision for triangulation of distance, and pupils that dilate or constrict depending on the intensity of

light. We have a constantly shifting variable focus. Our imagination reconstructs a map of the world in our brains. The variety, complexity, and detail of nature are infinite. Human perception and attention are not. Artist's pigments are, at best, approximations and analogues. Our attention is focused and bound by what is present in our minds; we see what we are looking for.

In practical terms, space is the color of your sky. It is the same airy stuff, but do not assume that your sky is simply blue. While you may "know" that sky is blue, your judgment of what pigment to use will depend on context, intent, and what your imagination wants. "Accurate" color is a bit of a myth. "Naturalistic" color is a flexible construction.

"Learning to copy a color that you see

is a very useful skill to develop."

Learning to copy a color will also allow you to paint what you remember or imagine. Naturalistic-looking paintings, however, rely not just on copying colors but on rendering relationships between colors. Get the relationship right, and the hue choices become more optional. Whatever pigments you choose for your sky should also appear elsewhere, in other mixtures & places. Avoid using one blue for the sky, but another for the greens.

I find it also helps to stop always trying to verbally name everything. That stream of consciousness conversation going on in our heads is not always helpful while trying to paint. While enjoying a fine Pastrami sandwich, is your mind full of words, or is it full of delicious flavor?

I cannot tell you how many hours I have spent walking back and forth, looking for the perfect composition, all the while the perfect light comes and then goes. Now, I like to know where I am going to paint ahead of time. I prefer to search for my spot first, usually on a different day. I value reconnaissance walks; time spent just looking at the world, not thinking about lunch. Give myself a chance to examine potential painting sites without the added pressure of completing a finished painting. I sometimes do fast drawings, sometimes just take pictures with my phone. Anything that looks promising. I take lots of pictures to review later at home, then print out a few on cheap copy paper. This helps me decide on a composition. I might do a thin, umber sketch, or wipe out, there in the studio, working out the compositional elements. Where is the horizon; where is that major tree or path. Just the bare composition & major shapes. Things will always look different next time out in the field, but this gives a starting point. When you later go back to the site to paint, this saves a lot of time, frustration, and anxiety. You are

ready to think color, and not worry about whether that tree needs to be one inch over to the left.

On days where I actually paint, sometimes it all works beautifully, sometimes not, but establishing a rhythm to one's workflow is useful and important. One needs to get comfortable with the process, and not too annoyed when it doesn't result in a beautiful painting. The logistics of plein air painting can be daunting (sun, wind, bugs, heat, cold, moving shadows, talkative strangers, and all the rest.) It helps to grow accustomed to this normal chaos, and not take it personally.

Not all painting sessions result in a fine artwork. Sometimes the start can later be developed, sometimes it is a lost cause. I look for "good bones" - a solid or interesting composition. After the painting session, put away the start; examine it later. At this time I am often tired, frustrated, thirsty, and not at all happy with my work. On the other hand, I have just spent the past couple of hours trying to sync my hands, eyes, and imagination. This is a state of mind not to be wasted.

A few minutes after you are done painting, spending time walking around & looking is very valuable. No pressure, no expectations; just look for shapes and colors. Whatever you notice, take some pictures, and think later. Your brain is primed for this from your painting session. One is very likely to find the next composition just a few feet away, invisible until now. Take lots of pictures to review later at home for the next outing.

To Prepare for Plein-Air Painting:

Begin with what you have and are comfortable with. Here are some things I rely on or find useful. Much can be left in your car for use if/when needed:

- appropriate clothing.
- Hat with sun brim- always have.
- Sturdy shoes

In cool weather, have layered clothes appropriate for the LOW expected temperature for the day, minus about 10 degrees. After an hour or so, fifty-five degrees feels like winter, and just a small bit of wind makes it much more uncomfortable.

- Extra sweater, wind cheater, or nylon rain jacket to keep in the car for use as needed
- Bug repellent if the temperature is in the upper 60's or warmer, and sunscreen.
- Water to drink- can leave in car

- Wet wipes of some sort for your hands can be useful & convenient. Single use packet can go in a pocket, leave in the box or in the car. I use specialty wipes that remove lead and heavy metals; I do use those kinds of pigments.
- Paper towels, 5 or 6 sheets is probably enough to have with you- leave more in the car.
- Painting knife, for mixing as well as painting.
- Medium & “palette cup” with lid. A couple of tablespoons is plenty if it is liquid. Some gel mediums come in a paint tube, and a small dollop can go right on your palette. I often use Galkyd Lite, or a similar gel medium. Alkyd alone can begin to dry rather quickly outside in the wind and air, so I sometimes add 10% oil to slow this down. Graham walnut/alkyd medium is also good, and dries more slowly by itself and doesn’t need extra oil. Same with Gamblin Solvent Free Gel Oil Medium. Many options out there; one needs to experiment to find what works for you. Email me if you have questions or need specific advice.

I save very small plastic or glass bottles with good caps for medium and solvent, to be lightweight and portable.

- Solvent & small cup- a couple of ounces is plenty. I use odorless mineral spirits. Good cap is essential. Many of those discount “palette cups” have caps that leak. Beware.
- Cloth rag for wiping canvas and/or brushes. Worn out t shirts are good, cut down.
- Two small panels, maybe around 8x10. I prefer panels for small work. Have two. Use a standard size. Stick to one or two sizes/proportions until you learn how this size and proportion works in practice. Don’t jump around with a different size & proportion every time. Repetition is how we learn.
- Palette (pre-laid out when possible). Some artists place a paper palette on a shelf attached to the easel. If this works for you, then great. But remember, there is often wind. Things that can blow away will blow away, and such distractions are what kills your artistic flow. I like the classic, handheld wood palette. It will last basically forever, and you will spend a lot of time with it mixing, judging, and deciding. This is for me an important tool. Have one that is lightweight and comfortable to hold. Ideally, it should fit in your box with paint laid out ahead of time. Many popular plein-air set-ups do not allow for this, and artists adapt just fine. How you lay out your palette is mostly a personal choice, but it makes life easier to keep it consistent. Arrange it chromatically. I arrange mine with cold reds at the top right, then to the left of that are orange and yellow. Down the left side are green, blue, and violet. Anything

else fits in where it seems appropriate; just keep it consistent, so you always know where to find things.

- For oil, I like bristle flat, round, and filbert brushes. Synthetic brushes work well with acrylic, but oil loves bristle. (Synthetics are constantly getting better.) For small panels, a range from size 2-8 should be sufficient. I usually also have a couple of soft brushes- usually synthetic, including a small pointy round. A soft brush can be useful, but not always necessary, to place color on top of existing wet color without your bristles scraping off what is underneath. I also keep a cheap hardware store 1/2" or 1" chip brush for scrubbing in. Use a bristle, not nylon. They should cost less than \$1 each, and are good for applying an imprimatura and blocking in; they keep one from getting too specific too early.
- Painting knife.
- Paint box to hold it all, and/or Easel of choice.

Bring what you are used to and comfortable with. If you are not satisfied with what you have, there are many choices out there for every budget. A portable easel set up, or pochade box, can be a major expense, so ask around and do some research. You may email me if you have questions. Points to consider: Are you good with it having size limitations in exchange for lightweight portability? Lightweight comes with downsides, too. Will it blow over? How many extra bags & boxes will you need to carry everything? What else will you need to buy and carry? Can you carry a wet panel on the easel or in the box when you pack up to leave, or do you also need a separate wet canvas carrier? Can you lay out your palette ahead of time? Can you close the paint box on a wet palette? How far can you walk toting all of this? Learning which of these questions are most important and appropriate to your particular workflow will take some experience to discover. We all eventually learn that we do not need half the stuff we bring, yet we always forget something.

I usually use an old-school French easel. It is not lightweight, but it also does not easily blow over in the wind. I can carry the canvas, wet or dry, attached to the easel. I can lay out my palette ahead of time, have room for brushes, medium, knife, rags, extra paint... everything in one package I can strap to my back. I can, and have, painted in sizes from 4x6 inches to 4x6 feet. Did I mention that it is not lightweight? Still, it is doable. I also sometimes use a smaller pochade box; they are lighter weight and more compact. Many great products out there.

Paints:

Bring what you are used to. If unsure or unsatisfied with your default choices, then see below for some basic color palettes, from which you can grow as you gain proficiency. Exactly which pigments you choose can be less important than that you choose a set,

and then stick with it long enough to learn its virtues and limitations. Make sure that whatever you choose is balanced across the spectrum, like learning the piano with a full 88 keys. (Little-used pigments can be represented by just a small dot of paint; it helps to be able to see it even if you don't use it.) If you have to walk any distance to your painting site, and if weight is a consideration, lay out your palette ahead of time, and leave those extra dozen tubes at home. Save your almost used up tubes, ones with maybe one good squeeze left, to put in your box, if you feel the need to bring extra.

Many artists worry about brand or whether student grade is good enough. That depends. Even the mid-priced professional brands like Winsor & Newton, Gamblin, or Utrecht are usually better in quality than just about anything available for the last several thousand years. Standardized industrial production has its upside. Is Old Holland a great paint? Yes. Is it 3 or 4 times better than Gamblin? Not necessarily. Old Holland cadmiums, for example, might have 10% or 15% more intensity than their less expensive competitors, but maximum primal scream power is not always needed. After all, cadmium yellow was not invented and available to artists until the 1840's, and cadmium red not until 1910. Previous bright yellows and reds were commonly unstable and not lightfast. Earth colors: ochers, siennas, and umbers, were the mainstay pigments for tens of thousands of years, going back to cave painting days. Modern chemists have been busy and now provide us with brilliant wonders.

We are spoiled with abundance.

A more useful question for the artist has to do with the oil used, the specific pigment used, and the paint handling qualities of the brand. Each pigment has its own best range of oil to pigment mixture, and even cheaper paints stay close to these standards. Old Holland uses the maximum useful pigment load, and you pay a large premium for this. High intensity, but stiff paint. One might need to thin it or add medium, just to push it around. Other brands, like W&N, Rembrandt, or Utrecht, are softer juicy. Easier to manipulate right out of the tube; they are all high-quality paint, with different consistencies. Even the adulterants used in student-grade paints are not always horrible. Expensive cadmium is often cut with cheap barium (py31), which is itself a fine, stable, lightfast pale yellow color that I often use by itself. It is just much less intense than pure cadmium. Chalk (calcium carbonate, or marble dust) is also sometimes added to cheaper paint as an extender. When ground in oil, chalk dries mostly transparent, but retains the body and handling characteristics of oil paint. It dilutes the intensity of the pigment to a degree, but in moderation does no harm. It is not garbage. Chalk is what gives acrylic gesso its tooth and makes it very suitable as an oil painting ground. Waxes of various sorts are also added to some paint lines to give all the colors the same handling consistency; each artist will have to decide if this is important.

For student paints labeled “hue” keep in mind that these are all mixtures of cheaper pigments that probably will not handle or mix as their name suggests. Some are acceptable, some less so. “Cobalt Blue hue” will contain anything EXCEPT cobalt. Read the label fine print, and pay attention to what the ingredients are, not just what they are called. PB15 is always phthalo blue; PY35 is always cadmium yellow. The specific pigment matters. I encourage you to use single pigment paints whenever possible. Learn them, and learn to mix.

Basic color palette:

Most Basic Triad- red, yellow, blue, + white.

Prismatic Primaries:

If one is just starting out, one might choose a severely limited palette of Quinacridone red, Ultramarine blue, and Cadmium yellow light. (You might prefer other pigments; there are many that could work.) The idea here is to learn to make things work by mixing primaries. We approximate and generalize. “Accurate” color is a bit of a myth. Best to learn right from the start that what we do is an imaginary reconstruction using imperfect pigments.

-This very basic palette will not capture all the colors of nature, and is meant to be an entry point.

One will not be able to copy all of nature's hues, but one can approximate relationships. Even a severely limited palette will provide a basic range for mixing without undue chaos. Approximate what you perceive. Learn well a few colors first; too many at once is confusing and frustrating. Having three blues on your palette, for example, is not only confusing, but if you do something interesting you won't know how you did it. Exactly which colors you initially choose is less important than making a choice, and then sticking to that choice long enough to learn the properties of the pigments. Add or delete later as needed. I personally do not use this severely limited palette, except for demonstration purposes.

“I prefer a more of a full spectrum by adding to this (at least) purple, green, and orange.”

Prismatic primaries + secondaries.

- This provides a basic full spectrum, from which one can mix almost anything. Different pigments can work too; the point is to have prismatic colors from all around the wheel represented. Examples might be:
- -Quinacridone purple or violet, or ultramarine violet, or manganese violet.
- -Winsor Orange (PO72), or cadmium orange.
- -Viridian (PG18) or Pthalo Green (PG7)

You want high intensity lightfast single pigments to begin with; things lose intensity as you mix them with other colors. Paints that are naturally transparent or translucent will often provide cleaner mixes than dense opaque paints. Also keep in mind that Pthalo pigments are thugs on the palette. I keep them around because sometimes one just needs that supercharged horsepower, but they do not always play well with their neighbors. One will spend a great deal of time knocking them down to a useable range. That being said, pthalo green is a bit less problematic for me than pthalo blue, and can be an inexpensive but intense alternative to Viridian. Mixed with quinacridone violets or purple it can make a wonderful steely blue. A small touch of pthalo green (or ultramarine blue) with transparent oxide yellow can work as a basic foliage green in underpainting or shadow.

Eventually, one should learn to use many different pigments- just not all of them all at once. Learn to use new pigments one at a time; see how it fits in, or not, with your existing palette.

I also like to keep a few other useful pigments on my palette:

raw umber and burnt sienna (for underpainting and general use, and/or transparent yellow and red oxide)

Umbers dry very quickly and make a wonderful warm/neutral imprimatura. The heat of a burnt sienna underpainting can set the stage for cold or brighter colors to sing. Earth colors can be mixed from prismatic colors, but sometimes I just want to have them there ready to use; they are useful, and have deep historical provenance going back to cave painting days. Transparent oxide red and yellow are modern formulations of classic earth colors.

Sometimes I want Cerulean blue, or cobalt teal, or cadmium yellow deep, just because I like them.

“... It is OK to include paints just because you think they are beautiful, but too many all at once leads to chaos...”

I sometimes use black:

- Mixed with cadmium yellow it makes an interesting range of greens,
- Mixed with red or orange it makes umber like shades.

My major problem with black is that too many artists rely on black to arrive at shadow color, and white to arrive at lights. This can lead to dead-looking, unsaturated color, and seems correlated with copying from photographs.

Work from life whenever possible if you want to learn. Better to use an umber to arrive at warm dark, or blue to arrive at cool dark. Save the white for later in the painting.

When establishing a composition,

One is first looking for large, major shapes, not details

Where is the horizon?

Is this primarily a sky painting or an earth painting?

Is there a color that catches my attention?

It is seldom easy to know exactly what kind of color you are looking at when observing nature.

Break it down to two major questions:

- Is the color in question darker or lighter than the surrounding color?
- Is it cooler or warmer?

Begin with a thin block in, and then wipe it back to get a paler value.

Make your best choice, or mix the pigments to get the approximate hue.

Approximations are fine; first, get into the ballpark.

Look at what you do as you place it on the canvas. No need to fill a large area with a color that does not sing. Nor any need to erase a single stroke of the “not quite right” color.

Save white for later.

If you cannot determine the color you need, then just let the tone of the canvas stand in for now, or use a neutral like raw umber, and wipe it back to get the approximate value; worry about it later.