

**A Primer on Plein Air Painting**  
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**PLEIN AIR PAINTING**

Painting “en plein air”-- that is on location, usually in the outdoors, is a delightful experience that every artist should try. Not only does it allow you to escape the solitude of a studio for a place of natural beauty of your choosing, but you frequently have social interaction with passers-by, many of whom will boost your confidence with words of encouragement and praise for your art (even if you are only toning your canvas). You also can enjoy the camaraderie and interchange of ideas with other artists if you paint with a plein air painting group. But the big advantage you get from painting en plein air is that you get to immerse yourself, with all your senses, into the scene you are painting. You feel the breeze, you hear the sounds, you smell the scent of the fresh salt air or invigorating mountain mist, or the fresh-mowed grass of the meadow. You feel the heat, the chill, the fog, the damp, the dry, the very essence of that which you are painting, and that, in turn, inserts itself into your artwork, so you not only capture an image, but the atmosphere and feel of your subject location.

It has been my privilege to paint in many locations across the United States and abroad, and I have come to recognize painting en plein air as a continuing learning process. I have put together a number of lessons I have learned in the process of plein air painting. Some of these, I have learned from study. Other lessons I have learned from workshops. And then there are the lessons I have learned from painful experience. Hopefully, the tips below will allow you a “paint-ful” experience that is not painful.

First and foremost, there is nothing that ruins a great day in the field like getting there, only to find out you have failed to pack an easel, or palette, or brushes, or paint, or some other essential item. Having learned, from experience, not to rely on my memory when packing for a plein air painting excursion, I have created the following checklist. Use this when packing and you should be good to go for most plein air painting endeavors:

**GEAR CHECKLIST- Do not go without checking each item here.**

- A. Easel- Preferably a French easel or folding easel or tripod-mounted pochade box
- B. Palette- plastic is good- gray color is good. Glass is super for oils.
- C. Brushes (see list below) Painting knives-optional. Pliers are essential for stuck tube caps.
- D. Canvas board (resists punctures) or canvas- not large- 11 x 14, 12 x 16 or 16 x 20 max.
- E. Spray bottle (if painting with acrylics). Oil media and thinner if painting with oils.
- F. Paper towels (I recommend Bounty select-a-size-- better absorbency)
- G. Paint- good paint- if acrylics, use structure/heavy paint in tubes per list below

- H. Water cup (for acrylic or watercolor)- I highly recommend a plastic stadium-type cup and
- I. Large water bottle for your water supply for acrylic or we - I use a 1-liter soft drink bottle
- J. Beverage(s) and snacks for hydration and sustenance.
- K. Apron
- L. Large plastic bag in which to stow wet palette when done (unless using a pochade box)
- M. Insect repellent
- N. Sunscreen
- O. Straight edge (as needed- such as for buildings)
- P. Canvas tote or other bag to hold B through O above. (I use a rigid tool bag from Walmart).

## **EASELS**

There are various types of easels available which are useful for plein air painting. Here are some of the most common ones and their pluses and minuses:

**French Easel/Half French Easel-** These are the wooden easels that fold up into almost a briefcase-type of configuration. I use a full-sized French easel for much of my plein air painting. There are also half-size French easels available, which are exactly that- half the width of the full-sized French easel. I like a French easel because 1) they are generally cheaper than some of the other types of easels, 2) they are generally sturdier than most of the other types of easels and less susceptible to being blown over by the wind, 3) You can store your paint tubes inside the French easel, which is VERY convenient, 4) with the paint drawer pulled open a little bit, you have a lip in which to set your container of medium (water, oil, or whatever) where it is readily available, 5) you can carry a canvas or canvas board attached to the easel, which saves your other hand for your tote, 6) French easels generally can accommodate larger canvases than pochade box easels, and 7) people are fascinated when they watch you set up the easel, pulling out the legs and opening up the top into the canvas-holding part of the easel. The downside to French easels is that they are made of wood and therefore are a little heavier than some other easels, especially if you carry your paints in them. On the other hand, by carrying your paints and canvas there, you free up your other hand for carrying your tote bag.

**Pochade Box Tripod-mounted Easels-** These easels consist of a wooden box with compartments that sits on top of a metal tripod. Usually, the top of the box has a single or double wooden surface that opens up to reveal a flat horizontal glass or Plexiglas surface on which you can mix paint. It is essentially an easel and a palette, all rolled into one. The glass/Plexiglas surface lends itself to easy cleaning with a razorblade or razor-edge paint scraper, which is a very popular feature. Since acrylic paint tends to dry very quickly into a hard surface, I do not recommend a pochade box for painting with acrylics. However, pochade boxes are quite nice if one is painting with oils. I have one and use it whenever I paint with oils. Pochade boxes frequently have additional compartments or drawers in which one can store brushes, media, scrapers, and other useful items. Pochade box easels are sometimes a little cumbersome. They

are generally a little lighter than French easels, but they do not hold as many paint tubes, and are a little less sturdy than French easels. Pochade box easels tend to have greater limitations as to the size of the canvas they can hold than do French easels.

**Lightweight folding metal easels-** There are a number of folding highly-portable metal easels available which are very useful, especially for plein air painting. I have several. One of them allows the top to rotate with the canvas to a horizontal position, which is great for watercolor painting, sketching, or pastels. The drawbacks to the metal easels is that they are a little less sturdy than the other easels- their light weight makes them susceptible to blowing over when a canvas is attached. They also lack the utility compartments found in French easels and Pochade boxes, so you'll have to carry more in your tote bag. When I use my lightweight metal easels, I usually carry a folding plastic table on which to place my medium cup, brushes, and other useful items. I carry one of these folding metal easels in my car at all times to allow me to paint if I run across an unexpected paint-worthy scene, or to use as a backup should one of the other types of easels break. They are about the size of a folded umbrella, so they don't take up much space and they are lightweight. Better yet, they are much cheaper than the other two types of easels-- you can get them in the \$30 - \$60 range.

**Summary on easels-** For my purposes, I usually use a French easel for plein air painting with acrylics, and a tripod-mounted Pochade box for plein air painting with oils. If I am hiking into rough terrain or painting in hard-to-reach locations, or if I am painting spur-of-the-moment, I'll use one of my folding metal easels. For all these easels, if you take a small piece of bungee cord (elasticized cord with hooks on each end- used to strap stuff on backpacker's packs-- available at camping supply stores), you can run it from one leg of your easel, through a roll of paper towels, and hook it on another leg, and you will have a convenient paper towel holder. Carry a second bungee cord- In windy conditions, you can hook one end to your easel and another to your tote bag, and the weight of the tote bag will help anchor your easel and keep it from blowing over. Additional tip- if your painting surface (canvas, paper, etc.) is not tightly held by your easel, you may be able to block it in place securely using rolled-up paper towels. One of my painting buddies, who suffers from foot problems and cannot stand for long, uses a folding chair with a flat tray in front, on which he places his canvas. There is no requirement to fit any stereotyped image of an artist painting-- use what works for you.

## **PALETTES-**

There are a variety of palettes available. Let me first dissuade you from using the handy wooden palettes that are typically included with French easels. They are not easily cleaned, and the wood-toned surface can give paints a different look on the palette than on the canvas. Pull those wooden palettes and set them aside for when you're desperate for a mixing surface, or better yet, for firewood. If you're determined to use them, at least cover them with varnish or acrylic so you can clean them.

If you're painting with a Pochade Box, you've likely already got a palette- many pochade boxes have built-in palettes. There are also glass and clear Plexiglas palettes available in the

traditional oval palette shape. The glass ones are excellent but a little heavy to hold for extended plein air sessions. The clear Plexiglas ones are nice. Both are excellent for using with oils.

For much of my plein air painting, I use a cheap (\$12) gray plastic palette (one of the few Soho products I would use). It's lightweight and big enough to hold a number of different paints with ample mixing surface. The drawback? - When painting with acrylics, especially in dry or windy weather, they can dry out before you're through painting when using a standard palette surface. The remedy? Either a spray-bottle filled with water, lightly misted over the paint about every 10 minutes or so (more often in dry or windy conditions) or mix a drying retarder medium in with your paints, or else- use a Masterson palette.

Masterson palettes and similar palettes are palettes (generally square or rectangular in shape, unfortunately) that have a lid like a Tupperware ® container. The Masterson brand system involves 3 parts- the basic palette with lid, a thin sponge in the shape of the palette, and a sheet of special paper. You wet the sponge and put it in the palette. You soak the paper in hot water for 15 minutes and put it on top of the sponge, and then you put your paint on the paper. The moisture from the sponge keeps your acrylic paint from drying out. Not only does that keep your paint usable while painting out in nature, but if you seal the palette with the lid, the paint will stay viable for at least several days. That is extremely helpful if you have mixed a particular color and need to use it later, say, to finish up your painting in the studio. The downside to a Masterson palette is 1) the cost, and 2) the square or rectangular shape does not lend itself to your holding it while in the field. When I use a Masterson palette in the field, I do so with my French easel, and pull the drawer of the easel out to make a little shelf on which to rest the palette. Usually, though, I paint with a standard plastic palette and just use a spray bottle to mist my palette with water when the paint begins to dry.

Disposable palettes- There are several brands of disposable palettes. These are pads of slick paper cut in the shape of a traditional palette. The idea is you put your paint on the top sheet, paint, and when it is junked up with so much paint it isn't usable, you tear off the top sheet and discard it, and start using the next sheet. While the concept is inviting, and may be quite usable in the studio, my attempts to use a disposable palette in the field failed miserably. The wind would flutter the sheets of paper, spattering the paint and preventing me from using the paper palette because it was flapping like a hummingbird's wings. Perhaps a simple paper clamp would help, but I still think you would have flutter and shaking on the palette surface, so I do not recommend a disposable palette for plein air painting.

Watercolor palettes. Although I love using Lukas solid watercolor pans in their metal or plastic case when painting watercolors en plein air, tube watercolors provide a greater intensity of pigment and can be very useful and are much more easily mixed. There are several brands of inexpensive (\$15-\$25) plastic folding palettes made for watercolors. There are some metal folding palettes that cost a little more, which have a thumbhole to facilitate their use. You can load these up with your favorite watercolors and when dry, fold them shut, and the paint should be available to rehydrate and use the next time.

## **TOTE BAGS-**

You will need a container to carry all the items in the gear list provided above. It should be a sturdy bag or container that preferably retains its shape. If you carry your paints in it, it is helpful to have pockets in it which allow you to sort your paints, thereby helping you to avoid having to search for a particular color. I recently acquired a semi-rigid canvas tool carrier bag at Wal-Mart for \$20. It has a lot of pockets on the outside, into which I have sorted my paints, so I can go directly to the pocket containing, respectively, my reds, yellows, blues, greens, whites, blacks, etc. without having to search. The inside of the bag has plenty of room for my water bottle, insect repellent, sunscreen, plastic palette (and bag for wet palette), pliers, brushes, water cup, paper towels, etc. It has a great handle for carrying, and I have already used it as an anchor to hold my easel down on a windy day. Another tip- I paint a small dab of paint from the tube on top of the cap to the tube. Then, when I look in the pocket containing tubes of that particular color, I can spot the exact hue I am looking for without having to rummage through other paint tubes.

## **BRUSHES**

- A. BIG flat brushes- a couple of these are good for toning canvas and laying in large areas of sky, field, or water.
- B. Comb brushes- These paint parallel lines- the fibers are like teeth in a comb. Very useful for painting tree trunk patterns and wave patterns.
- C. Fan brushes- Have several in different sizes- these are essential for painting leaves and foliage, and very useful in painting water or anything else requiring random dots or lines. Bristle fibers do best but have one with finer nylon bristles too.
- D. Round brushes- Several of these in different sizes are helpful.
- E. Filbert, flat, and/or angular brushes-- I use these for square edges, as well as generally covering an area. I prefer filberts (like a flat brush, but with slightly rounded corners). These are also useful for painting lines by moving them edge-on (ie: sideways to the main body of the brush).
- F. Rigger or liner- These brushes are useful for fine lines
- G. "Sword" or "Dagger" brushes- these are angle brushes with a sharp angle to the cut. The ones with shorter, more rigid bristles are excellent for painting lines, when pulled lengthwise across a canvas. They are extraordinarily versatile for many uses in painting. Avoid the longer, soft-bristled sword brushes, though, because they swish around and put paint where you do not want it.

- H. Hog bristle brushes- flats or large rounds are useful for stippling to depict things like water spray, paint splatter, or rough textures.
- I. Mop brushes- for watercolors, have several sizes of mop brushes. These function just like mops, to help you spread your colors over large areas of paper.
- J. For all tube media- oils, acrylics, or watercolors- One pair of pliers is ESSENTIAL for removing stuck caps on paint tubes.**

## **PAINTS-**

I recommend heavy body tube acrylics from a good brand like Liquitex, Lukas, Golden, Matisse, Holbein, or Charvin. I dislike Artist's Loft and Soho (I think the pigment is less dense and with Artist's Loft, the paints dry out in the tubes). I use the small size tubes for all except Titanium White, for which I use the large tube (you'll use a lot of white!). (Note- tube sizes mentioned are for oils and acrylics, with the standard brands named above. Watercolor tubes come in tiny sizes (generally)- one reason I prefer Lukas solid pan watercolors over tubes. I supplement the solid watercolors with a few select tube colors.

There are purists in the artist community who look down upon having lots of different shades of colors. They think it better to mix one's colors from a few select primary colors. Even if you are of that mindset in the studio, the situation warrants a different approach when going outdoors to paint en plein air. The time, weather, and space restrictions there render massive paint-mixing impractical. One needs to quickly mix the desired shade before the light changes, the wind shifts, or the other paint dries on your palette. A good array of tube colors enables the plein air painter to more quickly mix or tint the paints to the desired shade of hue. This is especially crucial with acrylics due to their faster drying time, but it is also desirable when using watercolors or oils, simply for reasons of expediency. It is better to spend the bulk of your time painting rather than mixing colors.

### **Basic palette- allows mixing most colors-**

- Titanium white (big tube)
- Cadmium Red light
- Alizarin Crimson or Quinacridone violet
- Cadmium Yellow Light
- Hansa Yellow (or Lemon Yellow) (this is better for mixing w blue to get green, and is cooler than Cadmium yellow.
- Cerulean Blue
- Ultramarine Blue

## **Dave's Essential Additional Paints for Plein Air-**

- Raw umber – a useful grayish brown color- good for tree bark, or mixed with white, weathered wood.
- Burnt umber- a reddish brown color- tree bark, dirt, dead leaves, very useful.
- Burnt sienna- an earthy dark red- great for painting rust on metal roofs and flesh colors, etc.
- Yellow ochre- Earthy yellow- great for sand (lightened with white) or with red, clay- mixes with blue for olive green, good for fall leaves.
- Cadmium orange- Essential for warm glow and warm highlights- saves mixing yellow & red
- Phthalo blue light- a nice sky-blue color- great for quickly rendering a sky
- Sap green- a basic green for vegetation- but mix it with other colors for variety- yellows for highlights, ultramarine blue for a cool dark or a red for a warm dark.
- Hookers Green- a nice dark green- useful for evergreens and dark areas of other foliage.
- Viridian Green- a dark blue-green- darken it for evergreens, lighten it for aqua-colored water.
- Dioxazine Purple- good for shadows and accents on browns.
- Payne's Gray- Essential for emulating black without the dead look of a pure black. Lightens with white to a bluish gray.
- Quinacridone/ Azo Nickel Gold- Gives a warm golden glow when applied as a thin glaze to a finished landscape, and also useful undiluted in portraying reds, such as rust. It can be useful in painting flesh colors with figures, as well – a very versatile color!

## **Other useful colors highly recommended for plein air painting**

- Naples yellow- nice for subdued sunlight and less-intense yellows- but you can replicate it with yellow ochre & white
- Brilliant blue- adds pizzazz. Mix with white for sky color, use for water highlights and broken color.
- Bismuth yellow- great for very light yellows- can replicate with hansa yellow & white
- Unbleached titanium- excellent for sand and weathered wood (mix with raw umber)
- Charvin (brand) Green of Provence- useful for painting grass and other vegetation.
- Charvin (brand) Blue Shadow- Very useful for painting shadows or, with white, gray skies or water.
- Charvin (brand) Midnight Blue or Indiancanthrine blue- Good for painting seas and blue-green water
- Raw Sienna- useful earth color- helps with wood tones
- Cobalt Blue- Good for tinting upper sky and for painting water and shaded white objects.
- Naphthol or Pyrol Crimson- Good for a true red (Cad red is more of an orange red)
- Chromium Oxide Green- useful for foliage colors
- Mars Black- not for painting black (it's too flat- use Payne's gray or a mixture of ultramarine and alizarin crimson for black) but mixed with white, provides grays w/out blue tones.

## **Considerations of Media-**

**Acrylics-** When painting en plein air, you will find your acrylic paints will dry on your palette fairly quickly unless refreshed with water spray periodically. Use your spray bottle every 10 minutes or so to re-wet your puddles of paint, but be careful not to overdo it, or the paints will run into each other. The nice things about painting en plein air with acrylics are 1) you can quickly do a glaze or paint over mistakes because the underlayer will quickly be dry, and 2) your painting will quickly dry so you can transport it without worrying about your work being smeared. If the quick-drying aspect of acrylics is a problem (or if painting in particularly dry and/or windy conditions), you might consider using a retarder medium which will slow the drying of the paint, or use a Masterson or similar palette which positions a moist sponge layer underneath a permeable paper palette sheet to keep the paint moist and usable. When using acrylics, remember they will dry slightly darker than they appear when wet. For acrylics, I use water as a medium, and have found college football stadium plastic cups (the thick plastic cups with your favorite team mascots growling at you) are ideal for holding the water.

**Oils-** Oils, including quick-drying oils (Winsor and Newton's Alkyd Oils are a favorite quick-drying oil) will stay moist and usable throughout your painting day, so there is no need to spray them. The flip side of that is that oil paints will still be wet when you leave the painting locale, so the painting must be protected or it may smear (and get paint all over your car, your clothing, and you). Oil paints take a long time to fully dry, and it is recommended that you wait as long as six months before applying varnish to an oil painting, although the wait time can be considerably shorter if using alkyd oils. You may want to try a relatively new innovation: water-mixable oils. These oils allow you to use regular water instead of thinner, which makes them very versatile. When thinning these with water, you want to avoid thinning them beyond 30% or they will lose their oil paint consistency. You can use oil media with them if you wish, or simply use water. The drying time is longer than for alkyd oils, but the convenience of no chemical thinners would be an advantage.

**Watercolors-** Watercolors are fun to use in plein air painting. They can be used for making a detailed sketch for a future studio painting in another medium, or they can be painted as a complete painting on their own. Since they continue to be water-soluble after they dry, you do not have the same problem refreshing them as you would with acrylics, which harden when dry. The primary concern with watercolors is to keep the painting dry once you have painted it. Accordingly, they are ill-suited for painting in rainy conditions or where water spray may be encountered (but you knew that). Watercolors tend to dry much lighter than they appear when wet. Especially when trying to paint dark areas or areas of vivid color, you should review those areas after they have dried to ensure they have not faded so as to dilute the impact of your painting. I keep a small bag with watercolors, brushes, etc., and watercolor paper in my car, so I can paint on the fly if I unexpectedly encounter an interesting scene. The water cup I use is a rubber collapsible dog water bowl. It takes up little space when collapsed, it holds a sufficient quantity of water, and the rubber material is heavy enough to reduce the chance of an accidental tip-over.



## **STARTING THE PAINTING-**

**Going to the location-** You of course want to paint something scenic or that will resonate with viewers. You need to be mindful of other factors in going to the location and placing your easel, as well.

**Know where you're going-** Even if you don't have a specific location in mind- if you're just cruising for a spot that looks paint-worthy, you need to know where you are and generally where you are heading. If you're hiking out in nature, that is all the more important. In remote areas, use trail maps and heed warnings. It may be a good idea to bring a compass as well as a map, and you should certainly have a cellphone with you for a variety of reasons. If you get lost, injured, or fall ill, it can be a lifesaver. A police-type whistle may be a good thing to carry to summon help, as well.

**Weather-** Check the weather forecast before going. Take water with you, especially if it is hot weather. Take adequate clothing if it is cold and/or wet. Leave if it thunders or severe weather threatens or is in the forecast.

**Natural hazards-** Know what terrain and wildlife you are likely to encounter. A number of people have died in falls while trying to reach a good vantage point for waterfalls, or in other areas where cliffs and drop-offs are found. Don't be that person. In Badlands National Park, the trail had signs warning of rattlesnakes. Even in North Carolina, we have rattlesnakes, copperheads, water moccasins, and coral snakes-- all venomous. Bears and coyotes inhabit much of our state and, although they *usually* avoid people, there have been attacks, so be mindful and be prepared. Bear spray and/or even firearms (if you are legal to carry them where you are painting) may be appropriate precautions in some locations. You can check with the local game wardens for information on any potentially hazardous wildlife, how to avoid them, and the best response in case of encounters.

**Human hazards-** People can also pose a danger to the plein air painter in several ways. The most likely problem is traffic. Crossing streets can be risky, but even if you set up on a sidewalk, you may have a bicycle or scooter come by you. Try to find a place out of the traffic flow. Another hazard that is increasingly prevalent these days is from the criminally minded who might see you as a potential victim. Painting with others or in a location where there are numerous people can reduce that risk factor. If you are painting alone and remotely, or in a dicey neighborhood, you might consider some self-defense mechanisms if you are qualified, competent, and legal to use them. Pepper spray, stun guns, and noisemakers are other alternatives, but the former two may be regulated, so check to ensure you can legally carry and deploy them and be sure you know the law for when you can use them, lest you get yourself in trouble. Usually, people will come up to you and chat while you are painting en plein air, which is nice, and I always enjoy chatting with folks who are interested in my painting. On only a couple of occasions, though, I felt the person chatting with me was doing so as subterfuge for a nefarious purpose. If the conversation sounds forced, or if their companion is maneuvering around towards your back, that might be the time to step back from your painting to ensure you are not being set up for a robbery or worse. Don't let these concerns dissuade you from plein air painting-- the risk of anything untoward happening is extremely low, and if you choose your

venue well, you should never feel any danger. However, it makes sense to be prepared, just in case. And painting with others is a good way to head off trouble of all kinds.

### **Visualizing the Scene-**

Many artists, including very accomplished studio artists, have difficulty visualizing what goes where on their canvas when painting a landscape on location. The view we have of our subject matter in a studio is much narrower in scope than the view we have in nature of wide-open spaces. Having a 360-degree view tends to overwhelm the senses. Not to worry-- there are several techniques that will resolve that issue for you:

**Viewfinder-** There are simple plastic viewfinders that are on the market under various names. These are really nothing more than a flat piece of plastic with a rectangular hole, although many have a sliding piece to allow you to vary the size of the rectangular opening. With such a viewfinder, you can hold it up to view the intended subject of your painting and it will define the borders and relative positions of all points within the rectangular orifice. You can make such a viewfinder yourself using cardboard and cutting a small rectangular hole of, say, 2” high by 3” wide, which will accomplish the same effect for you-- it defines what will be in the painting and what will be excluded from the painting. Hold it so your main focal point is where you want it (see “Composition” below) and you will see where everything else lies relative to your focal point. By moving it toward your eyes or away from your eyes, you can vary the view to expand or contract the field of view. Orient your canvas similarly (portrait or landscape, that is, vertically or horizontally), and paint what shows in your viewfinder when you hold it with the focal point in the position you selected for it.

**Cellphone or digital camera-** You can also emulate painting from a photo, as in the studio, by simply framing your intended focal point (again, using the tips in “Composition” below) in your cellphone or camera viewfinder and snapping a photo. You can then use that photo from the screen of your cellphone or digital camera to determine the layout of the various features in the scene you intend to paint. It is essentially painting from a photo, but with the added “Ooomph” that you get from being on-scene and feeling the atmosphere and mood created by the locality.

**Changing the view-** Keep in mind that if the viewfinder, cellphone, or camera view you want of your focal point leaves out that tree, cactus, or waterfall you want to include in your painting, you can certainly exercise artistic license and position them in your painting at the place of your choice. In other words, you can manipulate the view to include all features you desire, even if they are too widely spaced out in reality to be included in your painting. Similarly, you can exclude undesirable blights on the landscape such as telephone poles and wires, utility boxes, signs, billboards, and the like. That is why painting is superior to mere photography- you can edit items in or out as you choose. Enjoy using your artistic license- you earned it!

## **Composition-**

Composition of a painting is important. There are many books and videos that deal with composition. While an in-depth discussion of all the concepts of composition is far beyond the scope of this monograph, a few simple concepts can be summarized here that, if practiced, will keep you from making a composition faux pas. When you set up your canvas, before painting, mentally divide your canvas into 4 quadrants. Ensure that the focal point of your painting is in one of the 4 quadrants- do not put the focal point of your painting in the center of the canvas. Another good composition, where there are multiple focal points, is to array them in an arc around the periphery or some other portion of the canvas.

## **Horizon-**

First thing on the canvas- a good horizon line in paint or pencil- It can be above or below the middle of the canvas, but never in the middle vertically.

## **Sky/Background/Toning-**

Be sure to set in the background and sky before painting in the foreground. Otherwise, you wind up having to paint in the sky and background around the foreground details. It's a good idea to tone your canvas before going out for painting. Use a vibrant color that will add zip to the painting if the color peeks through the overlayers-- red, orange, etc., are good. If you have significant portions of sky, you could paint that in as toning. Just be sure to vary the sky color--darker in the higher regions. Phthalo blue light is a good base color, with the upper sky being darkened with cerulean, cobalt, or ultramarine blue. I sometimes use Brilliant Blue mixed with white for a vibrant sky. Good cloud patterns are excellent sky backgrounds if well done. Practice painting believable clouds with interesting lighting and shadows- they can truly "make" a painting.

## **Light Direction**

Before you begin painting details, determine which direction your light is coming from. Ensure that you portray the highlights and shadows of your details consistently with that. Do not forget to paint the shadows-- they give the painting depth and believability. Sharp contrast draws people's eyes to a painting, so try to get good contrast between light and shadow.

## **Focus and Out-of-Focus-**

We don't see everything in focus with our eyes. When we look at nearby objects, the background is blurry. When we look at distant objects, the foreground is blurry. If we paint all of our painting in focus, it loses some of the natural feel. If you blur the area that is not the central point of your painting, it will give it a much more realistic look.

## **Distant and Close**

For distant vistas, be sure to remember that the atmosphere gives them a bluish tint. Especially with distant mountains, far shores on large bodies of water, and across broad fields, glaze a thin, transparent Williamsburg blue to increase the perception of distance.

Remember that light colors advance your image, and dark colors recede it. That being said, sometimes you can create a dramatic framing effect by portraying a foreground in shadow to focus the viewer's attention on a mid-ground highlight or focal point.

## **Avoid Broad Uniformity of Color**

A big mistake new artists make, particularly in painting a large area such as a sky, a grassy lawn, a wall, or a large body of water, is to paint the area with a large brush in one uniform color. That gives a very flat and unnatural look to the painting. Instead, use smaller brushstrokes. You can lay a base layer of color with a large brush to cover the canvas using a particular color as a base, but then take a smaller brush and tint it and lighten it in various places, and add bits of other color (“broken color”) to generate interest and variety. Intersperse some texture in an irregular manner- no regular pattern to it, to represent grass blades, or textural bumps in concrete or plaster, or striations and grain in wood.

## **Painting Bodies of Water-**

Painting lakes, ponds, streams, rivers, and other bodies of water can be difficult, especially when the water is transparent or translucent such that objects and/or colors from the bottom are visible, in addition to the reflections and ripples across the top of the water. What I do in situations like that is I first paint a rough idea of what the bottom of the body of water looks like, using the colors that I see (which are not necessarily the true colors of the objects on the bottom, but rather the color that appears to the viewer as they look at the body of water). Once I have painted the bottom (probably in tones of greens or browns or dark sand), I then glaze over with a thin light blue-gray-white mixture in areas where light is reflecting off the surface of the water. Areas where the bottom appears are left in place. Then I add the reflections of trees, buildings, people, or whatever else is being reflected on the surface of the water, breaking those images up as the ripples do on the water's surface, and subduing the colors to match the values of the actual reflections. A few white and dark lines with a rigger or liner brush, mimicking the fluid outlines of ripples in the water, complete the process. If there is a particularly sparkly area of sunlit water, I use a round or liner brush to put in very tiny fine dots of pure white to emulate the sparkles of light off the water.

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**About the Author-** David D. Lennon is a largely self-taught artist in Clayton, North Carolina. He has been painting en plein air since 2005 and has won a number of awards for his art. He is currently serving as President of Clayton Visual Arts, the premier art organization in his community, and is on the Board of Directors for the Johnston County Arts Council. Dave welcomes input and suggestions for ways to improve this monograph. You can reach him by email at [davelennonart@yahoo.com](mailto:davelennonart@yahoo.com).