



The Voice of the Landscape

A MEDITATIVE APPROACH TO PLEIN AIR PAINTING

BY CATHERINE KINKADE, PSA*

We know pastel is wonderful, but have you considered that it is the ideal medium for landscape "en plein air"?

Landscape is probably the most difficult, and most wonderful subject matter for a painter. Was it Georgia O'Keefe who said that no one can teach you to do a landscape? It is just too personal.

Becoming one with the landscape. That's what painting is about for me. As I paint outdoors, time ceases to exist; I only know I am separate from the landscape when I move.

It is all well and good to listen to suggestions for ways to develop a "sense of place," but ultimately, the landscape will work for you only to the extent of your own passion about it. It is as much an internal "landscape" as outside. When the viewer can feel your subject matter coming from within as well as without, the pastels will sing.

Painting "en plein air" is often preparation for a more refined studio piece. But the plein air piece is often enough all by itself—not better or worse than a studio piece. It just feels different.

There's an exhilaration in making

the most of the fleeting moments as the light changes. The challenge of deciphering all the chaos and excitement of Nature flowing in as raw data to understand and simplify. Immediate; changing; always surprising. There is so much to look at!

Out there, it's vital to simplify.

Simplify the Palette

Very few pastels are needed; a "limited palette" serves perfectly and keeps the baggage weight down. Sometimes I can get away with as few as five colors, never more than about 24. It's a pleasant

surprise to discover how much you can get out of very few materials. Primary [red, yellow, blue] and secondary hues [the mixture of two primary hues], appear fairly seldom in nature; it surrounds us with "tertiary" hues — combinations of the three primaries

I discovered an invaluable tool for choosing a palette. Writing in 1972, Hereward Lester Cooke described a fascinating way to explore one's personal color sense that I've been using for years — for myself, as well as for my students. It's a simple way to consciously and unconsciously find a unique personal color palette for studio work and for a slimmed down palette for the field. [See "Personal Color Chart" sidebar.]

From this I develop a "Plein Air Palette." [See sidebar.] To simplify color mixing on site, I make two reference sheets in my sketchbook: (1) contiguous squares of each of my Plein Air Palette pastels and (2) a sheet showing all the hues these pastels can generate, especially tertiaries from the "least likely" combinations.

Simplify Nature's Complexities

Sketches and explorations help me see what's essential in the search "to become the landscape." Most landscape paintings simply talk too much.

There's no better way to approach a new place or start the day gently, meditatively, than a Silent Walk with sketch book and black flair tip pen. I make notes to myself as well as sketch... Soft eyes. Note peripheral vision. Let go.

Where is north? Where will the sun be in 20 minutes, an hour? And where will the shadows be then? What is the underlying form of the landscape? When I understand the underlying form, the voice of the landscape becomes my artistic voice.



"Cranberry Bog with Barn," 18" x 25"

Simplify the Process

Once an interesting composition has emerged from the landscape and I've done the prep work, it's time to take a deep breath, and let go — without planning ahead, just letting it flow. That's the moment of becoming the landscape. Whatever comes out is fine. Standing there surrounded by nature, there's no concern for a "finished piece;" no expectations to match against what's produced.

Plein Air Palette

Set apart the pastels you used for your Personal Color Chart. Make sure you have some warm colors, some cool.

If you haven't included them, **add the primaries** [red, yellow, blue], plus black and white.

Consider the season: add a pastel or two which is appropriate — perhaps something delicate and leafy for spring, a flower color you love for summer, something "earthy" for fall, blue violet or silvery for winter.

Personal Color Chart

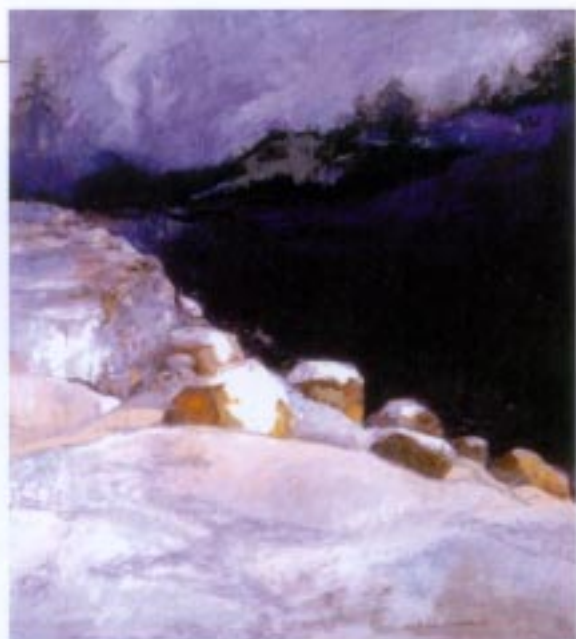
Make a grid of twenty one-inch contiguous squares [say, 5 rows x 4 rows] on good white paper. Fill each square with a single color. Any color, in any value, any hue. You can repeat colors or put a different color in every square, as long as the overall effect seems harmonious to you. There are no wrong choices. Don't mix colors within the squares.

Add one for your regional landscape — for example, dark green for New England or the Pacific Northwest, deep Prussian for ocean, dark mars violet for French vineyards, or English red and yellow ochre for Arizona.

Add one or two "you can't live without."

Select your least favorite pastel [aside from the primaries, black and white,] mark it with masking tape and use it as an "accent," to add a fillip at the very end of a piece.

You should have about 24-30 pastels. Leave the rest at home.



Top to bottom: "Winter Rocks: SHAN," 24" x 30"

"Corn Hill Falls II," 15 1/2" x 20"

"Truro Locusts I," 29" x 24"



"There's no better way to approach a new place or start the day gently, meditatively, than a Silent Walk with sketch book and black flair tip pen."

Kinkadee (continued)

Sure, there's backing away and taking a look at the piece upside-down to see what it needs — perhaps a few last strokes. But essentially it is whatever it was meant to be for this particular day.

With no more than two hours to work outside on a sunny day, I try to do the same site at the beginning of the day when shadows and colors are warm, and at day's end when the shadows elongate and shade into violet. On gray days the shadow play disappears, but everything grows softer and more harmonious as middle values dominate, no less appealing in its own quiet ways — with many more hours to capture it.

Outdoors it helps to think in sequence: from croquis to value sketch to color sketch to finished piece to studio piece. A "ritual", not in any sense of limitation or rigor, but a "settling down," to honor something of value to you.

The first time I really became aware of this process was in a sumi-e class with Master Moto Oi. We ground our ink silently for an extended period of time before beginning to paint; it made all the difference.

As a side note, my non-rigorous ritual includes a warm up for extended sitting by doing slow Qigong or yoga stretches.

And a final note: Take all suggestions with a grain of salt. Go out, focus on what it is that you want to say, take a deep breath and enjoy the experience of painting en plein air at every possible opportunity.

"One can sense the style and attitude of ritual in almost any action that is done expertly, with full attention to the present." —Alan Watts

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Pastels for Plein Air Painting

Plein Air "Kit"

Suggestions for What to Take With You

- Folding chair, such as the "Howda" seat, with good back support
- [Optional] Folding easel, with pronged feet; attachment for working horizontally or vertically
- Soft-sided briefcase or airline carry-on with large wheels, into which everything else listed below fits:
- Portable masonite board
- Sketch book: good quality white paper, that opens back on itself. If it doesn't have a band, add an elastic band or ribbon. I make a "pocket" at the back for a viewfinder, my "Plein Air Palette" and mix charts.
- Cushioning: newsprint or paper used for grounds in sheets or a pad; I personally like the feel of several blotters.
- Museum tape
- Small air canister
- Pastels: see sidebar "Pastels for Plein Air"
- Plastic or wooden case to hold pastels such as Artbin case, with foam inserts
- 6B pencil or 6B graphite stick; conte crayon (sepia or bistre), stump stick; kneaded and plastic erasers; black Sharpie marker or drawing pen

Grounds

- Grounds cut to the size of your sketchbook or board: [Save end piece to test your pastels.]
- For value studies: small, good quality white paper, or sketchbook
- For color studies: quarter sheet Canson Mi-Teintes in white or gray, craft brown [unfortunately not archival], or handmade deckle edge paper such as Pearl's
- Grounds for larger piece — the largest you can carry in your pack, in an assortment of types and hues, such as Canson Mi-Teintes loose or in a pad with glassine interleaves, or my favorite, sandpaper. Consider complementary colors, dark gray or black, which produces wonderful sparkle, especially in dappled full-value range scenes.

I suggest to my students that they buy the very best materials [pastels and grounds] they can afford. Inferior materials are devastating for a beginner and no professional would use them.

I personally prefer Unison, Diane Townsend, Terry Ludwig [amazing greens], and Schmincke.

Basic kit: Hues preferred without black or white added unless noted [*]

- Primaries: cadmium red or rose madder; lemon or light yellow; ultramarine blue [not phthalo!]
- White: Pure white occurs naturally very seldom in nature, and is best used sparingly unmixed.
- Black is one of the best mixing tools you have. It will not only deepen colors where needed [the cast shadow under bushes, dark fir trees or the edge where the water meets the land], but in the case of mixing with red and yellow, hands you a whole set of tertiaries that are perfect in the landscape: earthtone red-violets and vegetative greens.
- Neutral mid-gray: wonderful for color mixing as well as value
- Additional: dark blue violet *; chrome green light; permanent red light [=orange] or scarlet

What to add next [optional]:

- Mars violet [or use the red with black]; high value raw umber *; high value blue gray * for skies and scumbling atmosphere over distant images
- Other possibilities: red violet [fuchsia] for accent or to mix with green; cobalt; phthalo blue for accents, sky/water, mixing tertiary green in shadow; yellow ochre; mouse gray [a wonderful purpley gray]; green gray; Prussian blue or indigo *, raw sienna; naples yellow; a warm gray; and neutral grays to give you a full range between black and white.

Supplemental hues, especially in shades of vegetable and grayed greens, grayed purples:

Consider the wonderful landscape assortments made by Unison, Rowney, [especially for grayed violets and greens and warm gray] or Diane Townsend [dark hues]; the Schmincke landscape assortment, which comes in its own handy wooden box; or Sennelier's half sticks. Portrait assortments will do just as well. [It will have some warm and some cool colors, but the landscape assortment may have more vegetative greens in it.]