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MALCOLM DEWEY FINE ART

Breakthrough Art Workshops ©

Plein air painting

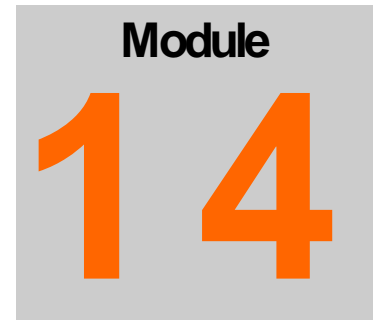
BREAKTHROUGH ART WORKSHOPS

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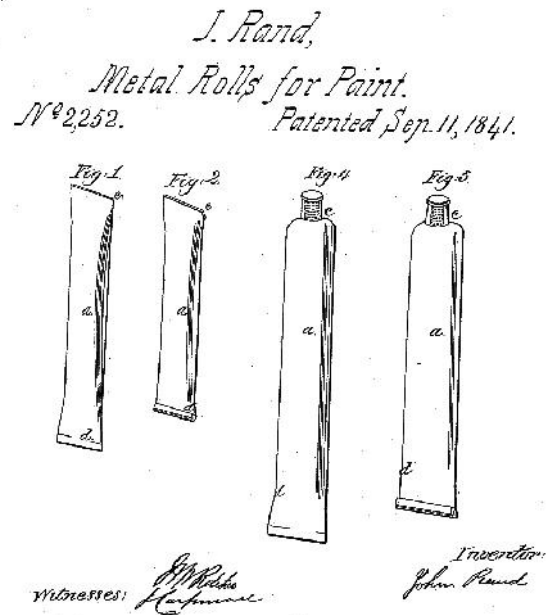
Plein Air Painting

There is an undeniable urgency when painting outdoors – nature’s so grand, the canvas so small. It takes the human mind with all its grand abilities and complexities to sort through the overwhelming visual feast set before it and re-create on canvas the essential components of such beauty and wonder. (Jan Blencowe)

Let us venture ... outdoors!

Plein air painting simply means painting outdoors - in the open air to be precise. The idea of outdoor painting as we understand it today is associated with the impressionist movement from the early 19th century. It was however thanks to innovations such as the manufacture of reliable paint that was stored in tubes in the 1840’s that made it possible to have paint on hand outside the studio. Added to this innovation was the impressionist movement that took advantage of these innovations. Portable easels and palettes made outdoor painting possible without too much trouble.

The fame of pioneers like John Constable proved that real life scenes had appeal to the new class of art admirer. Although Constable was not an impressionist he did paint the famous *Hay Wain* that depicted a slightly romantic view of an everyday farm community at work.



Patent drawings for the first paint tubes that also featured a cap for convenient use.



The Hay Wain by John Constable

The impressionists aimed to paint real life scenes and the natural light effects supplied by mother nature. The concern with natural light became a passion in itself with some famous artists dedicating their careers to this. To add to this art became increasingly democratised and a popular activity for the merchant and professional classes. Social painting outdoors was not uncommon.

Fast forward to the present and we can see plein air painting taking off in ever greater popularity. The reasons for this are many and include relaxation from the pressures of work. There is also a pleasant break from our digital world back to the analog world of paints and brushes. Organised paint outs are popular in larger centres adding to the social aspect of art.

A growing industry in painter's equipment has resulted in all manner of kit to make outdoor painting easier. Add to this the exposure to the great outdoors and we have a perfect leisure industry for those with time on their hands. Professionals and serious part-timers recognise the added value to be gained from painting in the landscape itself. The immediacy and experience provides a holistic painting experience often lost in the studio.

What exactly does painting outdoors entail?

This is a matter of debate. Some groups have set criteria whereby a certain percentage of the painting must have been done outdoors to qualify as plein air. Others are more lenient. We can find guidance from the impressionist themselves. They did not impose limits, but even then there does seem to be some controversy. Monet did apparently argue that his outdoors paintings were not completed in the studio when it seems clear that many were indeed completed indoors. The preferable approach is that the subject must be outdoors, be researched and prepared onsite and the painting must have progressed at least halfway to completion outdoors.

How difficult is it to meet these criteria? Well provided that weather conditions are cooperative there should be no real trouble for the average artist to complete a painting outdoors. The painting size is also smaller which certainly helps. A certain touch-up or two in the studio might be necessary, but that's about it. As with all things a bit of preparation makes this experience a pleasurable one.

Getting started:

What are your objectives?

Having an idea about what you want to achieve goes a long way to helping you on the correct path. For example if you want to produce several finished works that may be sold then you need to have your preparation in good shape. If however you are looking for a few quick **preparatory studies** that may go on to become studio works then a basic kit and less time will be required. All these approaches are valid as they fall within the concept of painting from a real and authentic subject.

This guide will assume that you are looking to paint outdoors for pleasure and would like to complete at least one painting with a few sketches and studies for later work in the studio.

The Benefits. Is it really worth the trouble?

Besides the pleasure elements suggested above there are significant benefits for the artist.

Notes from the field become part of an ongoing experience where each painting contributes in some way to the next. (Gavin Brooks)

Colours outdoors are different when photographed. Personal observation trains the artist's eye to take note of accurate colours.

Picking out **composition** when facing the vast panorama is daunting at first. The artist will quickly learn techniques to isolate strong compositions. Selection of elements necessary for composition and disregarding others will develop the artist's eye.

The ability to observe **shadow** areas filled with life rather than underexposed darks in photos is an added benefit.

There is also much to be gained from the process of **simplification**. This applies to identifying shapes and values better and the skill that comes from

mixing colours from a limited palette of colours. All of these skills are learned under the pressure of time and the changing weather that this implies.

Basic Equipment

Essentials include:

Paint: a smaller palette makes outdoors work more intuitive than fiddling with many tube colours. Try titanium white, cad red light, cad yellow light and ultramarine blue. Add to this alizarin and pthalo green. If you prefer the luxury of more colours then burnt sienna may make your life easier. There is honestly no need for more than this.

Brushes: a selection of size 6-8 of flats and filberts will do the trick provided your painting surface is approximately 20cm x 25cm. Bigger than this and a size 10 or 12 will be handy for laying in larger shapes. Bristle or finer hair is all good. Add a rigger for a few details like branches, telephone wires and such. It is also useful to draw your initial shapes if you are so inclined.

Add a **palette knife** that is flexible enough to paint with too.

Mediums:

To save space I am happy to have basic odourless white spirits. Get best quality - it does make all the difference. You may wish to add a little premixed medium like linseed oil mixed with spirits to aid with initial lay in of colours with thin layers. Also a medium to speed drying such a Liquin may be helpful. You can get by happily with just the white spirits.

Containers:

These make life outdoors so much easier. A few plastic containers that have reliable screw on lids will help to hold the white spirits. A second container for any other medium will do. A plastic bag for trash is necessary.

A plastic brush container will keep your brushes out of harms during transportation. No bent bristles please!

A container to carry you art supplies is essential. A well designed tool box is cheaper than a fancy wooden paint box and may have more options too. Make sure the container is big enough to take you equipment. If you want your bottle of artist spirits to stand upright then make sure the box is tall enough.



Basic kit for an hour of happy outdoor painting.

Easels

There are many options out there and it depends on your style of painting and how long you spend plein air painting. If you intend to only paint outdoors occasionally and for short periods then spending big on a french easel may not be necessary. In this case a lightweight aluminium field easel may be fine for you. I have one of these and it is great for when I have limited space for materials. It can be folded down to a small size and is very economical. I also have a french easel which sometimes doubles as a studio easel when I need this. The french easel can accommodate a large

palette and this is handy when I need more space for mixing. On the downside it is heavy and I would not want to hike to a distant spot with this easel.

Another nifty option for quick work is a **pochade box**. Basically a box that opens up to reveal a place for your panel to be fixed and a small space below for a palette. It is small enough to perch on your lap or can be fitted onto a tripod with a special adapter. I made a pochade box out of a small wooden paint box by taking out the partitions and fitting a cabinet hinge on the side. A couple of brackets hold the panel in place inside the lid while the bottom of the box acts as a palette. I can simply close the box leaving my paints still in the box and they will be fine until I get back to the studio and scrape them out. I enjoy the pocahde box very much for its convenience.

[See the video of me painting in Bathurst with a pochade box.](#)

Wet Panel Carrier

The unsung hero of plein air painting. What could be worse than painting a few panels then fretting about getting them home without smudging or destroying the wet paint? The panel carrier comes in various sizes and will allow you to slot the panels in and close the box thereby making safe transport possible. There are lovely wooden carriers, but they can be expensive. Other options include plastic and even cardboard ones that provide temporary solutions. Of course if you are handy with woodwork you can make a basic carrier. I have made a few myself that work well for temporary purposes. If you are travelling overseas for instance it would pay to get a professionally made wooden box.

Paper Towel and Rags

Another humble hero to the oil painter. Paper towels (or loo rolls if you run out) are essential to clean off your brush in a hurry and soak up spirits to dry

your brush after cleaning. A rag may be needed to wipe a spill or wipe your painting panel.

Miscellaneous:

These are items that are important:

Camera, viewfinder, value scale

They do help with composing a scene and the value scale can help with light and dark colour relationships.

Sketch book. Making value studies and other preparatory drawings is a good idea and can really make all the difference. If time makes this impractical then get on with painting, but you take your chances.

Comfort items

Hats, umbrellas, sunscreen, raincoats, spare jersey, food, water, folding chair, cell phone.

Safety

Basic safety issues need too be considered. Where you paint may be unsafe due to wildlife (whether on four or two legs), environmental issues , extreme weather and any other issues that may present themselves. Take precautions, tell friends where you are going to paint and make sure you have a backup plan.

PAINTING

The above lists seem like a big task, but most of it is simply getting the items that you already have organised into a system. After a few times out you will have this system working efficiently. For example I have a panel carrier and pochade box in my vehicle so it is possible to stop and paint. At the very least grabbing the missing items and dashing off to a nearby paint spot need not take more than a half hour.

Tips about painting:

Use small painting panels: ideal for me is the standard 20cm x 25cm MDF panel. It is small enough to allow me to complete the painting in about 20 to 30 minutes.

If the painting goes well the panel looks great framed in an oversized moulding. A grand statement piece. Bigger panels can work too, but you may spend too long on it and miss other opportunities with other scenes.

Pre-prime and tone the panels. This is a big help. I double prime the panels in gesso or oil based primer for artists (not regular hardware primer). Then tone the board with a wash of diluted oil paint. A warm tone like raw sienna, burnt sienna or even red make good landscape panels. Sometimes a cooler neutral is good such as ultramarine. Have a few options. My panel carrier can hold 12 panels so I have a few options on hand.

[See the videos on priming panels](#)

As mentioned above it helps to have an idea about what it is you want to achieve. Do you want rolling hills? farmlands? sheep or cattle? people on the beach? When you find a good place to set up you will need to work quickly but efficiently.

I set up my easel and squeeze out my basic paints onto the palette. Line up my brushes and make other arrangements getting my kit ready. I then get out the sketch book and make a couple quick **value studies** to establish the darks and lights and maybe the midtone areas.

Check **composition** in a viewfinder and take a few quick photographs. I will then quickly **draw in the main shapes** and plot important points on the panel that correspond with the points established in my composition. For instance where a road starts and ends. Where the focal point is and where

the **horizon line** is. Then I get stuck in with painting straight away. No dawdling to second guess myself.

ESTABLISH
THE HORIZON
LINE FIRST

Keep direct light off your palette and panel. It may be necessary to paint under an umbrella or shade of a tree for example. If not possible then at least make sure your palette and panel are out of the direct light so that you do not overcompensate with values.

Shade trees are heroes to a lowly, overheated plein-air painter.
(Brenda Behr)

I like to **start with a big brush** and start painting in the dark shapes usually with a diluted mix of ultramarine and burnt sienna. It is these darks and their relationship to the lights that are critical to the impact of the painting. **Remember impact comes from just this** - relationships between colours and values. This applies to the old masterworks and to modern landscapes too. Once your darks are in then change brushes and move to the lights.

Lights in landscapes are the sky and areas receiving direct or indirect light. The sky is usually the lightest. For the sky you will need to bring in some white but keep it broken with a touch of ochre.

The landscape may be more a **midtone** so you could get away with no white in the colour mix for your midtone areas just yet.

What is the problem with adding white paint at this stage? White does not keep warm colours warm and it makes shadows opaque. Much better results and richer paintings are achieved when less white is used. So I keep early layers as free as possible from white paint. Go ahead and mix colours, but bring the white in only where really necessary. This may sound strange to beginners who are often told that tons of white paint must be used. The result is often a painting of chalky colour that struggles not to look pastel.

With darks and lights in you can **block in the mid-tones**. These will usually be foreground and middle ground areas that range from cools in the distance to warms in the foreground. They are simply areas between brights and darks.

Simplicity

This is key and why a large brush and an emphasis on shapes is so important. Rather go for large shapes and go for simple colour relationships and value contrast to get more impact.

It would be better to use thick generous paint applications than small brush details. It is always a pleasure to see texture from thick paint and brush strokes. This is one of oil paint's advantages so use it where you can. Yes contrast between bold and gentle paint application is necessary too for instance shadows are mild and mysterious while bright foregrounds can have thick juicy paint.

Remember to try and suggest with shapes and paint application too. For instance lines on a road can be suggested by the paint strokes too. Wavy thick paint strokes can suggest the motion of water - you get the idea.

Develop your painting by adding more colour and keeping a close eye on your scene. Do not get caught up in details. Work quickly and intuitively. Pay attention to light and shapes and adjust accordingly. Look at your edges and soften where needed. Focal points can have harder edges, but try to avoid this elsewhere.

[See video on edges and brushstroke](#)

Stand back to look at the panel often and compare then adjust where needed. Forget perfection - go for mood and eye catching elements that say more than perfectly rendered details.

Above all else have fun. Concentrate but keep the process light hearted. Loosen up - breathe - sing if you want to. This is creativity and freedom.

When the painting is done put it in the panel carrier and start another with a different scene. When back at the studio put the panels up somewhere and assess them quietly. Have a seat and look at them across the room.

Assess the colours, composition, mood and the painting as a whole. How do they make you feel? Do you relive the moment? Do they surprise you now that you see them in the safety of the studio? I am sure that there is a certain vibe that you pick up from the plein air painting that is unique.

I am often amazed by the impact such a small painting makes despite the short time spent painting it. Maybe I do a larger version or a similar version. Often the larger version fails to have the same vibe. Art is funny like that.

Are your first few attempts failures? You may think so at first, but they are necessary for development – crawl, walk then run – such is life and art!

To look, to see, to understand, to capture – however imperfectly – is to be part of the land in a way like no other. (Jan Blencowe)

Helpful Tips:

- The sky reflects the landscape so it is not pure blue. Bring the warmth of the landscape into the sky from horizon level and darken the sky at the top of the panel to suggest depth. A touch of ochre or red to break the pure white and blue work well in the sky.
- Keep the sky interesting with movement suggested in brushstrokes and colour. Flat sky can make the landscape too static.

- Sky holes in trees are darker than the sky in open space so tone the sky holes down a notch in value.
- Mix your green carefully. Look at the colour of the green rather than assuming it is something when it is completely different.
- Consider the shape of trees and bushes. They are distinctive so try and render the shape accurately. Forget about the leaves. We are after shapes. Also the nature of the tree. A bluegum tree is soft and wavy compared to a solid oak tree.
- What part does indirect light play on the underside of the tree and branches? Lighten and warm colours to make allowance for this.
- Aerial perspective - lighten and cool the colours in the distance. You will not be able to see reds and browns in the far distance so grays and cooler earthy colours will take over. Observe and mix accordingly.
- Keep light consistent. A warm light will be consistent throughout for instance in the morning or afternoon so keep this in mind for harmony. Accurate colour notes are a benefit of close observation.

Working outdoors or from life puts you in direct contact with the life force, not just the light and the landscape, but also the vitality of the world around you. (George Carlson)