Painting in the 21st Century

Put your **plein air** *painting experiences to good use as you discover how using digital technologies can make every day a great day to paint.*

When I started landscape painting more than 20 years ago, I felt that *plein air* painting as the only authentic painting method as practiced by the great painters of the past. I wanted to paint out in the sun and rain like Monet, Sisley and Pissarro. To my surprise, I later learned that Monet and other Impressionists used photos. Despite these revelations, I labored on, vowing not to use photography.

All this changed a year ago when my wife Pam bought me a digital camera. At first I took a lot of bad photos, but slowly grew more comfortable with this new technology. When I started painting from my digital images I was surprised. My paintings weren't stiff and wooden as I'd feared they'd be. In fact, my studio work looked much like my *plein air* paintings.

I realized that all those years of painting outdoors had imbued my memory with details of the landscape that digital photography just couldn't capture. *Plein air* painting had trained my eye to use digital photos more effectively and thereby enhance my studio experience.

THE SUN'S EFFECT ON THE CAMERA

I quickly realized that the bright, sunny days I felt were mandatory for *plein air* painting weren't well-suited to photography. Light values were bleached white, middle values were lost, and shadows were too dark and lacking in color. On overcast days, however, I had far better results with my digital camera. The overall color was brighter and middle values were clear and understandable. Cloudy days were now valuable, and I learned to take advantage of early morning and late evening sunshine when the low sun creates stunning shadows and light effects. Even as my photography skills improved, it was clear I'd have to modify and interpret the digital images to make a good painting. The digital image was a god starting point, but there were many decisions to be made during the painting process.

USE WHAT YOU KNOW

My years of painting outdoors helped me fill in the gaps - to re-create whatever elements were missing from the photos. For example, I know that shadows have a lot of color potential. In photos, shadows often take on a murky blackness and have no color direction. I add the blues, pinks and purples I know are there. Shadows are often more transparent and lighter in value when you see them with the naked eye than in photos, so I correct this problem in my painting. At the same time, middle values are often dull in photos. So if a photo shows me a drab gray for tree bark, I add the tints of pink, blue and lavender that I've seen so many times. I have the confidence to make those color selections after all those years of stubbornly painting outside no matter the weather.

Color is the major focus in my landscape paintings. As good as digital images are, a lot of color is lost and distorted. Color problems can create errors in the value scale if translated verbatim into painting. Values are critical to creating an illusion of depth and space. Sunlit objects need to be brought down in value to compensate for the glare of reflected light. For example, on a blue-green leaf the reflected light will seem nearly white in a photo. When I'm painting that leaf, I'll need a medium-value blue there. It's important not to feel bound to the photo. Take charge of your painting and use the photo as a helpful tool not as the master.

The human eye is easily seduced by detail and drawn to it like a moth to a searchlight. Painting *en plein air* stifles this tendency as time constraints force you to search for essential details and leave out the rest. Photos, on the other hand, are stuffed with detail and there's temptation to go overboard when using them as painting references.

PAINT FROM THE COMPUTER

When I printed my digital images, the transparent glow I saw on the computer screen was lost in translation to print. So I took out the middle man, and now I paint from the computer screen. My Windows XP program allows me to download images to the document file of my computer, and I can view my images as a slide show that fills the entire computer screen with each image. I can pause on any image I want.

Painting right from the screen lets me make the most of the high quality of digital technology. The transparent screen image is large and bright, and surprisingly like a *plein air* scene. I set up a chair next to me with my pastels and paint away in almost embarrassing comfort. Gone are all the negatives of *plein air* - toting heavy supplies, bugs, wind, heat, sweat in your eyes. At first I felt guilty, but I got over it!

All winter I painted from beautiful images of lush gardens, fall color and trickling streams. The dreary wintertime flew by. I was more productive and made better use of my creative time. When spring arrived, I was in good form and ready for the prime of the painting season.

GRAY COMES FIRST

I like to vary my approach to each painting. Departures from the norm revive my painting and inspire new approaches. Sometimes an exercise will last for just a few paintings while other experiments keep me going for an entire year or longer.

Here's a new approach that continues to interest me. Before beginning in pastel, I paint the composition in values of warm gray. I use three colors of Delta Ceramcoat acrylics that I like

for their very matte finish. I start with ivory white and black acrylic, adding a bit of black to the ivory to make three gray values. I keep the underpainting very loose by using several worn brushes (I'm an admitted brush abuser and don't like to use expensive brushes that I know I'd certainly ruin!) The gray underpainting (as shown in the examples) helps me simplify my values and establishes the composition.

What surprises me about this method are the bright a lively results. I used to think underpainting killed bright color. I'm rethinking that theory. It's important to be flexible and not be ruled by your own doctrines and fixed notions. Artists can get stuck in ruts of their own making. Change is good! There are no one-way streets in painting. Don't be afraid to veer off on a side road.
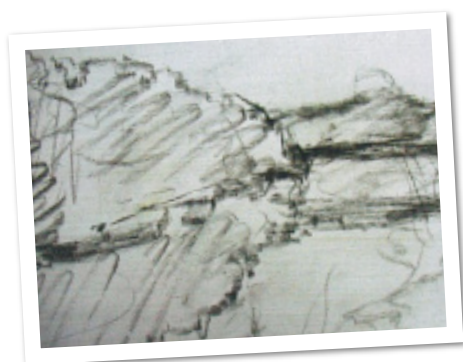
Chart a Course for Color

A vine charcoal sketch became my map for the painting Still Waters (at right, 16 x 20). I made the background trees smaller to open up the composition. Knowing I wanted warm colors to peek through the greens, I laid in a bright foundation of color. The cool blues in the distance added depth. I chose to leave the painting looser and less polished, which gave the painting a lively *plein air* feel.

Plein Air and Beyond

Painting *en plein air* is a great education. I've gained skills that make my studio painting much stronger. I wouldn't trade my 20-year stint as a *plein air-only* artist; it helped me create memories that will last a lifetime. Now I'm traveling down a new road with some fine state-of-the-art tools at my disposal. The use of photography, especially with the new digital cameras, opens wide my creative horizons. I've enriched my painting experience and brought it into the 21st century.

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Gray as the Foundation

To make the scene more exciting than it appears in the digital photo (above), I decided to push the color. Beginning with a three-value gray underpainting (above, middle), I added some washes of Walnut Drawing Ink with a brush. Knowing I could tone it down later, I kept the color as bright as possible as I added the pastel (above, far right). The red clay soil appeared washed out in the photo, so I made it richer with warm oranges. Finally, I added the brightest yellow pastels to punch up the mustard blooms in Mustard by the Barn (at right, 16x20).