

THE JOY OF PLEIN AIR PAINTING

by Wendy Oehlert Adams

*"Each artist sees and interprets composition and subject matter individually...
Regardless of the content of their paintings, all plein air artists have one
goal in common: to express the effects of light on color."*

Lois Griffel, *Painting the Impressionist Landscape*

Painting is an homage to color.

It is also an homage to shape and design. It honors how one shape relates to another, and how this relationship can change the color tones of another. Like people, objects have auras. When these auras overlap they create almost invisible subtle changes in each other.

Painting is an expression of feeling.

The viewers not only see the subject matter the artist has chosen to bring before them, but how the artists feels about that subject.

Plein Air painting is an homage to nature.

A Plein Air painting can illustrate the warmth of the sun on a field of hay, or the mystery of the fog rising behind a distant hill. The artist focuses on land and sea and light, and how they effect one other. The same scene can be painted repeatedly and evoke a different feeling. Weather changes light and its reflections, which in turn change the feeling surrounding your subject. The composition remains the same, but because the light effects are different the result will be different.

To illustrate this take the view from your window. Watch it as the weather changes. Think about what colors you would put on your palette to paint the scene you see today. Look at the same view at twilight, and again at dawn. Observe how the colors you would need to paint the scene have changed. Look again in the fog, the rain and the snow. All of these paintings, although the same subject matter from the same angle, would be vastly different. They would evoke different feelings from the viewer. But all are technically the same except for the atmosphere surrounding them at the time they were painted. This is what Plein Air teaches us to observe and to record on our canvas.

Plein Air can be painted using any medium. I have used watercolor, colored pencils, acrylic and oil. I have friends who use pastels. Don't let your medium of choice keep you from venturing out. I usually paint in oils in the field. Some people prefer water soluble oils for Plein Air because the turpentine is an inconvenient solvent to carry. Because one is never sure how far they may walk before choosing your sight for the day it is important to travel light. After many outings I have streamlined my equipment.

What I recommend as necessary are:

- a small portable easel and tripod (your portable easel should have a palette and space for most of your other necessities)
- 5-6 tubes of paint plus 1 large tube of white
- 1 palette knife and 4 various sized brushes
- small container with a tight lid for turpentine or other liquid (not glass)
- value chart, view finder
- pencil, small sharpener, large eraser, vine charcoal stick
- 3x5 Sketch pad for thumb nail sketches
- several Q-tips
- Small Swiss army pocket knife
- plastic bag for trash
- bug spray, sunscreen, gray dark glasses, hat

All of this should fit into your portable easel

Also:

- Paper Towels
- canvases, 8 x 10 or 9x12
- a canvas carrier of some sort for going home with wet canvases (if your medium requires)
- bottled water
- I also pack a slicker jacket in case of rain

Through trial and error I have found that I can carry everything I need in just a large canvas padded drink carrier from CVS (\$19.95). These are light to carry and the insulation shields the paints from the heat. A back pack is also a good way to carry these things.

In order to get out the door easily to paint Plein Air I keep these things packed in a bag by the front door. That way I am always ready to go. These are extra supplies so I don't waste valuable time and energy packing from my studio.

When an artist commits to a Plein Air Workshop he/she has an instant community of painters to be with, a schedule carefully planned ahead for all and a guide and teacher to lead the way. Also, an intriguing place to paint has been pre-selected, a demonstration will be given to inspire the students and the instructor is there to facilitate. I often feel like Alice in Wonderland at the end of such a day when every other artist shows their work. Like snowflakes all are different and all are fascinating.

After such a workshop experience I return home inspired and dedicated to continuing to go out and paint on location. But life can trip us up. Work, chores, family, mail, e-mail, commitments of all kinds conspire to keep us busy. The next thing we know weeks have

passed and we have not once let nature guide our brushes through the air to achieve atmosphere in our landscapes. I have found that making a date with another painter or two who enjoy Plein Air painting and putting it on my calendar as I would a luncheon date works for me. There are Plein Air groups I know in Nashville, Chattanooga and Atlanta that meet regularly once a month. Call your local arts organization and see if one already exists. If not, start one yourself. Artists are great people to spend the day with.

I also have a list of locations where I would like to go and paint by myself. I love company, but painting alone in nature has its own meditative appeal to me as well. I become connected with nature in a very personal way. Besides infusing me with a new appreciation of nature, and teaching me to observe the atmosphere around me, Plein Air has changed my painting technique. With the sun arching overhead, slowly changing every shadow as I work, I must be swift in my execution of the painting. Look, think, feel and stroke the canvas with color. It is like a dance, a duet. There is a rhythm to the actions taken. I find that I also paint more swiftly even in the studio now. I have less anxiety about what I put down on the canvas. I am willing to be more experimental. If I don't like what I have painted I can change it, paint over it, or start again. Losing the fear of making a mistake has not kept me from making them, but it has allowed me a greater freedom in my work.

Plein Air has brought an element into my technique that is new as well as giving me access to an appreciation of nature that I didn't even know was part of me. I don't get out to paint Plein Air as much as I would like. I hope that you will try painting Plein Air if you have not, and continue it if you have. And call me to go with you anytime. My stuff is packed and waiting by the door!