

Outward Bound

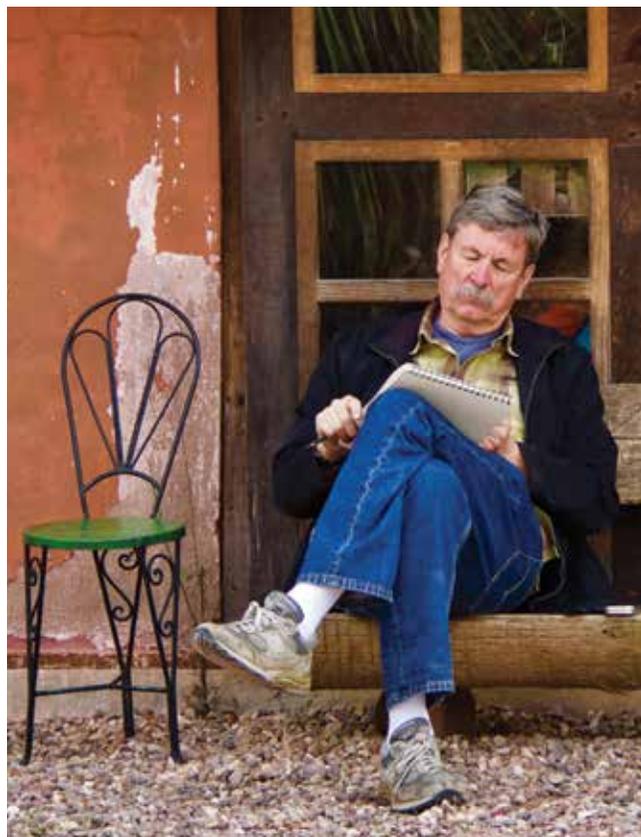
Have you ever drawn or painted with the earth underfoot, the sky above and the sun or the moon as your source of light? If not, you should follow the path of countless artists and give it a try.

In the late 1800s, the French Impressionists coined the term “en plein air,” which was then adopted by artists the world over to refer to artwork done outdoors by direct observation. The concept was to study nature and light first with drawings, then in color notes, painted sketches and paintings completed on-site—or perhaps to return to the studio where more formal, finished compositions could be created. In time, each of these steps became considered an art form of its own, admired for its characteristic merits.



ABOVE
Title TK
by Timothy Clark, year TK, pen-and-ink, dimensions TK

TOP RIGHT
Artist Kirk Van Tassel sketching in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico.



PLEIN AIR DRAWING

If you're new to working en plein air, drawing is a great way to start. Choose someplace special, or just go wandering and let the place find you. Sit on a rock or on the ground. Observe. Then, begin anywhere. What matters is simply starting.

As you draw, try to follow the advice of Asher B. Durand (1796–1886). “Take pencil and paper, not paint and brushes,” he wrote in *Letters on Landscape Painting*. “Form is the first subject to gain your attention—draw with scrupulous fidelity the outline or contour of such subjects as you shall select. ... If your subject be a tree, observe particularly wherein it differs from those of other species.”

Enjoy the experience. Return to your favorite sites at different times of day and in different seasons. Carry more than one surface to work on as the daylight changes and new ideas occur. Stop when you are tired. If you are using graphite, slip a sheet of waxed paper between pages or spray them lightly



The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak

by Albert Bierstadt, 1863, oil, 73½ x 120¾. Collection The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York.

Bierstadt (1830–1902) endured great hardships in order to travel to the Rocky Mountains, where he did many drawings and painted sketches. He brought these back to his studio, in New York, and used them as the basis for grand, panoramic landscapes such as this.

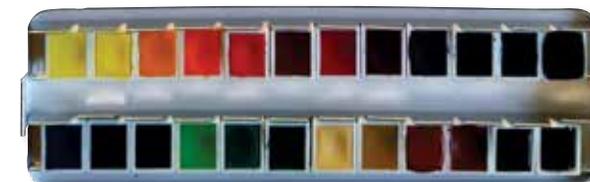
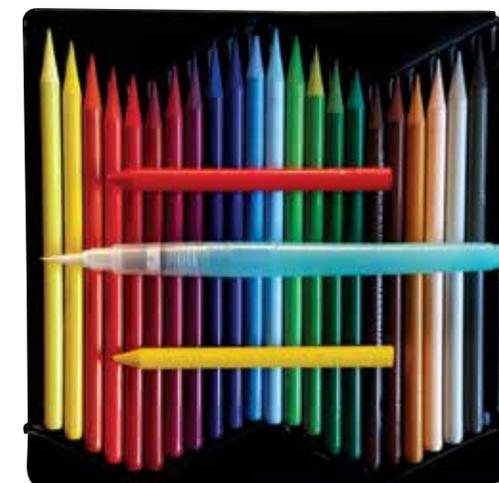
with matte workable fixative designed to protect against smudging. When you've finished a drawing, note the date, the time and the place. Sign your name. What you've done is truly yours, and hopefully it is, in Durand's words, “unmingled with the superstitions of Art.”

You can spend a lifetime creating rewarding plein air drawings with nothing more than pencil and paper. But if you're eager to try other media and techniques, you can follow the lead of any number of master artists. For instance Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890), inspired by the drawings of Hokusai (1760–1849), did countless studies of the fields of France using pens made of hollow reeds cut to diagonal points, which he dipped in walnut ink. You can try the same.

DRAWING WITH COLOR

If you'd like to add color notes to your plein air drawings, there are several ways to do so. You can work on toned paper, using graphite, charcoal or sanguine Conté for darker values and white charcoal for lighter values. Alternatively, you can work on white paper with a selection of colored pencils or erasable ballpoint pens. Colored ink washes work well over a pencil sketch, as do water-soluble colored pencils or crayons, which can be used dry or wet. To work wet, you can use a traditional brush, or you may want to try one that has a self-contained water supply.

Pastel is favored for plein air work by many artists—Degas



Portable painting supplies include water-soluble pencils and crayons (above) and watercolor blocks (below).

MATERIAL WORLD

(1834–1917), for example. He often started his landscapes with a charcoal underdrawing on a surface similar to tracing paper, attached to a rough-surfaced card. He then applied dense, crosshatched pastel marks. He used opposing colors—such as mixing blue-greens with salmons and pinks—to create dynamic blends of hues. He fixed each layer using shellac diluted with alcohol to build a new surface for the next layer.

To follow Degas' lead, choose a limited palette of pastel pencils, sharpened Nupastels and soft pastels. Organize them by color, and pack them tightly in rice or cotton balls in cigar boxes. You can bind a few boxes together with thick rubber bands or bungee cords. You can also try PanPastels, which come in small round plastic containers and can be applied with brushes like dry paint. As for surfaces, slightly sanded pastel boards will give you a rough texture. Equipped with a can of quality workable fixative you can, like Degas, work in many layers on one drawing.

You can also take the plunge into full-color drawing with watercolor. A highly portable *field box* can fit almost everything you need: 12 half-pan watercolor blocks, a brush, a water container, a sponge and a palette. You may also want to carry small tubes of white gouache or select other colors. Disposable yogurt containers are useful for keeping clean and



Golden Sunflowers and Gold Finch, Buttonwood Farm, Connecticut
by Kathy Anderson, 2013, oil, 32 x 18.

"Almost all of my paintings are started en plein air and finished in my studio from sketches and photo reference," says Anderson.

dirty water separate. Remember—clean water makes for clean colors. For your surface, try a pad of cold- or hot-pressed watercolor paper.

EQUIPMENT

Thanks in part to innovations spurred by artists in the 19th century, contemporary artists can bring a whole range of art equipment on location without much difficulty. Lightweight metal easels come with telescoping tripod legs and compact storage containers. Folding chairs that can be carried like backpacks make it possible to



Acrylic paints can be kept moist and ready to use on location by storing them in a plastic fishing tackle box.

set up comfortably in almost any environment.

Pack carefully. Take as little as possible, but don't forget bug spray, sunscreen, paper towels, garbage bags and a hat. Wear comfortable shoes and layered clothing. Try to dress in neutral colors, because bright colors and white reflect onto

work surfaces—historically artist's smocks were gray, blue or black. If you notice this becoming an issue, consider using a compact umbrella that can attach to your easel to filter glaring light and make it easier to appraise values and colors.



At a Still Point

by Sherry Camhy, 2017, oil on unstretched canvas, 35½ x 29½. Painted at Munson Pond, in New York.

TIP:

To help keep acrylic pigments moist between uses, you can store paints in the separate sections of a plastic fishing tackle box. Rest a wet cloth inside the lid and store the box in the refrigerator.

Many common household items can be put to creative use for painting en plein air. For instance, yogurt containers can be filled with water, and milk bottles can be used to hold paper towels, pencils, and paintbrushes. Cotton pads and Q-tips can be used for blending.





View From the Bridge

by Sherry Camhy, year TK, water-soluble pastel and pencil on cream paper, 8¼ x 11¼.

If you would like to paint—whether informal studies or more finished plein air paintings—the task is a bit more complicated. Some painting equipment to consider:

- Paint tubes are heavy, so pack a limited number of small tubes. An alternative is to put some of each color—more than you think you'll need—on a disposable palette and store this in a plastic “paint saver” box, ready to be used on location.
- Water-soluble oil paints make it possible to wash brushes with water, but be careful not to dilute the paints with too much water.
- Consider palette knives in lieu of some brushes.
- Various mediums can help control the drying time of your paint. If you use acrylic, in particular, you may be interested in a slow-drying medium. A plant water sprayer can come in handy as well.
- Carrying cases are useful for bringing wet paintings home safe.
- Stretched canvases can be cumbersome, so some plein air artists work on cut sheets of primed canvas that can later be stretched in the studio. Lightweight boards are a wonderful alternative to canvas and are available in a wide range of shapes and sizes.

It used to be that painting outdoors was an occupation largely reserved for wealthy travelers completing their “grand tour” of cultural sites. Today, however, we're all free to travel near or far and create art on location. Throw your preferred supplies in a backpack, hit the road, and enjoy an adventure drawing or painting en plein air. ❖



Artist TKTK painting en plein air in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico.