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View from Vignale at Civita Castellana, Maddine Insalaco

various supports executed in small and large scale. Careful observation of nature and its translation into paint continuously refines our color sensitivity and hones our pictorial skills. Our approaches to studio painting are separate though, one representational and one abstract. In each case it is the insights and information gathered outdoors that provide the formal organizing principles of our respective pictures. Both approaches are concerned with products that appeal to the eye, manifest a truth to the means, and reaffirm the importance of painting as an activity.

Unlike our early artist predecessors, we inhabit a world offering a range of substitutes for direct experience: digital photography, motion pictures, electronic games, and the internet to name just a few. More and more, there is a movement to a virtual rather than real experience of things. We are not sure yet what the consequences of this

trend will be for humanity, but there is no question that the more experience becomes virtual and mediated, the less we will feel alive, in control, and aware of our connection to the world and each other. The quality of experience will suffer. By contrast, we realized that painting outdoors offers an unusual experience of authenticity. All of one's senses are involved in provoking the deepest appreciation of the beauty of the natural world. The simple act of looking and quietly observing enhances the experience of being alive. There is nothing quite like it. This fact must certainly have contributed to the longevity of the open air painting tradition in Italy. It is what keeps us going outside every year.

Maddine Insalaco and Joe Vinson

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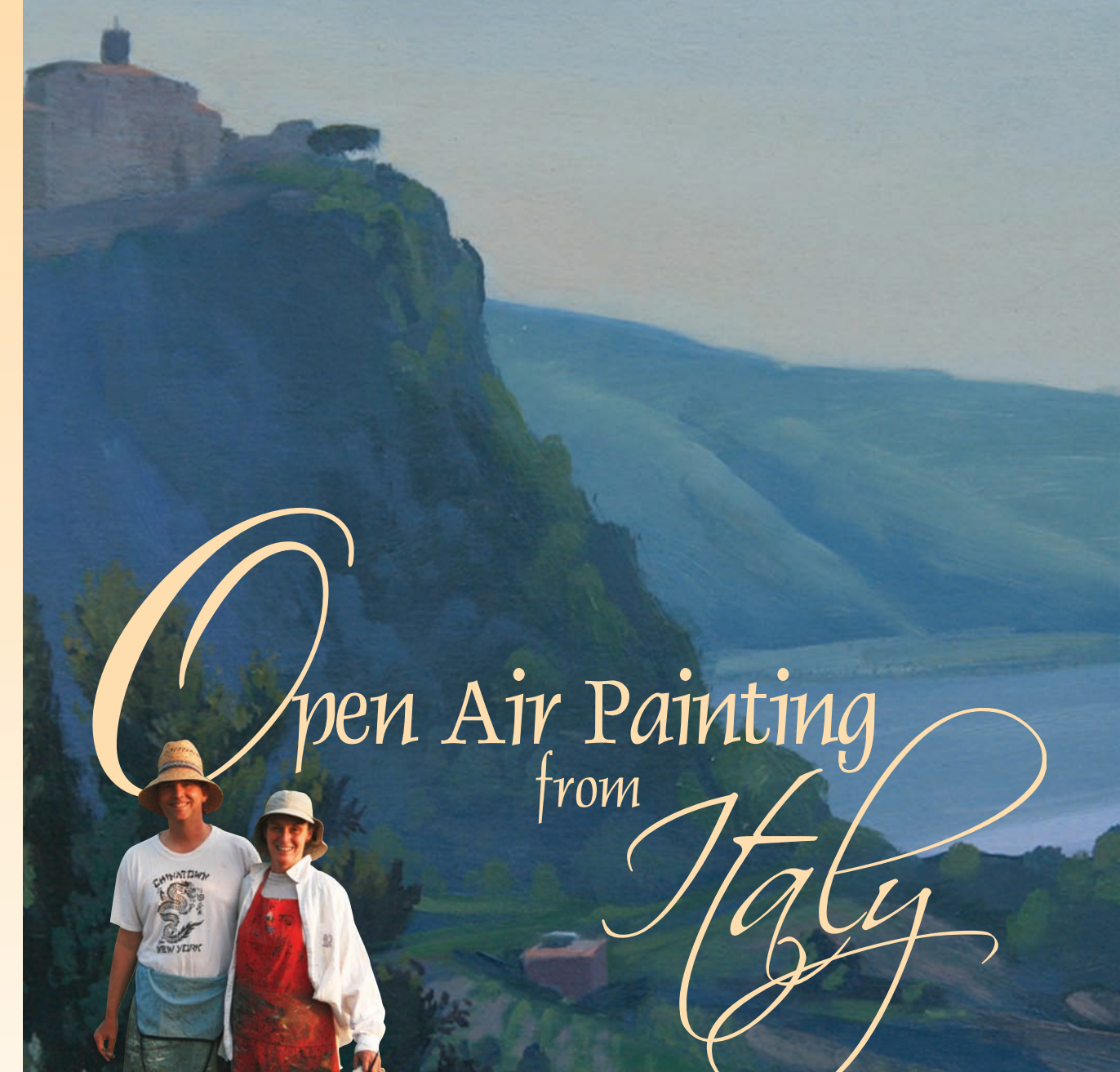


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Open Air Painting from Italy



a continuing tradition

January 18 – March 2, 2008
 Museum of Arts and Sciences

Maddine Insalaco painting Badia Ardenga Cemetery

Italy is beautiful. The spectacular scenery, art treasures, and agreeable climate have drawn people to the country for centuries. In fact, it was the beauty of Italy that led us to base our landscape painting activity there years ago. Our initial enthusiasm for painting directly from nature was encouraged by a coincidental series of major exhibitions focusing on the early open air painting tradition in Italy in New York, Paris, and Mantua. We were thrilled to discover that we had inadvertently become part of a long history of artists dedicated to painting in the outdoors. Yet, we really knew little about this history and its significance. We were even less aware of any meaningful relationship between that tradition and ourselves as contemporary painters. It seemed a question worth investigating. After all, we were physically in Italy and curious to know the many places, unfamiliar to us at the time, that had once featured largely in the open air itineraries of the past.

A Tradition Defined

The tradition of artistic study from nature in Italy is very old, the origins of which are impossible to date precisely. The legacy of classical antiquity and the patrimony of the Renaissance gave Italy, and Rome in particular, an unchallenged position as the center of the art world by the early 16th century. Rome became host to a vast community of aspiring international artists intent on finishing their training by directly studying from the great works of art and landscapes associated with classical literature and poetry. Leonardo da Vinci, writing at this time, encouraged students to use nature rather than other artists as the authority in learning to paint. The great genre of classical landscape painting, created by Claude Lorrain and Nicolas Poussin

in the 17th century, was inspired by excursions both into the Roman countryside, the *Campagna Romana*, and in front of the famed antique monuments of the city itself.



18th Century after Claude Lorrain with Nemi and the Nymph Egeria

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observation, that open air sketching in oil became an

Cover painting: *Palazzo Ruspoli and Lago di Nemi*, Maddine Insalaco

In the earliest days, drawing tools and, to a lesser extent, water colors, were the preferred media for making outdoor studies due to convenience and portability. In the 17th century there was a limited but growing tendency to sketch in oil paint in the open air. Admittedly more cumbersome, it was acknowledged to be the best medium for a truthful representation of nature. However, it was during the Enlightenment of the 18th century, with its emphasis on empiricism and scientific

established artistic activity. Essays and treatises on outdoor painting, most notably P.H. Valenciennes's "Elements of Perspective," were published and effectively codified the practice.

Specific itineraries with precise motifs emerged throughout the Campagna that were routinely followed in the course of what could be described as the Artist's Grand Tour. These painting itineraries enjoyed approximately two hundred years of consistent travel by international artists. While the earliest artist travelers, including Claude and Poussin, sought to study nature in the hallowed terrain of the Campagna, subsequent generations of artists followed the prescribed routes out of reverence for these classical landscape masters. Most notable were Wilson, Valenciennes, Jones, Corot, and Turner, who themselves became masters in their own right and objects of emulation for later pilgrim artists.

A Shifting Aesthetic

Up until the early 19th century, the traditional goal of open air painting was to provide the artist with a visual data base of sketches that could subsequently be consulted for the production of formal compositions in the studio. Subjects tended to be specific elements of landscape, such as trees, clouds, water, architecture, etc., that were often anonymous. Such works were regarded as studies and not final works of art in themselves for several reasons. They were small in scale and executed on paper, a low cost support. They were usually produced hastily and showed visible brushwork and thus lacked finish. More subtly, they were considered too physical and not intellectual enough to qualify as art.

Ironically, it was the open air sketching process itself that undermined traditional painting. French artists accustomed to working directly from the motif, such as Corot, actively continued open air painting in France in the forests near Barbizon. Works conceived and executed for the most part

Badia Ardenga Cemetery, Joe Vinson

outdoors, containing less formal compositions, void of narrative content, and a loose, spontaneous approach to paint handling suddenly became a feature of exhibition art. A shift in aesthetic preferences took place that facilitated the subsequent innovations of the Impressionists and ultimately led to modern painting.

Following Traditional Itineraries Today

When we moved to Italy, we were immediately drawn to the idea of making our own Grand Tour of the historic painting itineraries of the Campagna. We were both interested in art history, and naturally, anything relating to landscape. We already had an appreciation of classic open air Italian oil sketches. Their fresh, modern appearance was very accessible to our sensibilities, allowing us to instinctively feel a connection to the artists that made them. Many of the places on these routes have fallen into obscurity and were decidedly off the beaten track. Therefore, it was a novel way of getting to know contemporary Italy, one more genuine and less jaded by mainstream tourism. What we did not realize at the time was that we would be investigating much more than the tradition of open air painting in Italy. Rather, the effort involved a larger

dialogue about painting itself and what it represents to us.

We understood fairly soon why it was that the oil sketches of the 18th and 19th centuries seemed to defy stylistic conventions of the time and appear so modern to us. It was nothing more than the simple fact of the time factor



limiting execution. The fugitive light of the sun and unpredictable weather conditions oblige the artist to work fast. In this situation, painting becomes more of a physical than intellectual activity. Culture has less chance to insert itself as style or fashion and leave its trace. Thus artists working at a distance of two hundred or more years from each other, equipped with the same tools, can produce works of astonishing similarity. The link between us is our physical selves: eyes and hands coordinated by sensibility. The strange paradox is that, in limiting production time, open air works acquire timelessness.

We speculated that the freedom associated with working outdoors was a key factor in paving the way for modernism. It was not just in the painting technique, but also in the relaxation of dress and behavioral codes necessitated by physical factors like heat and sun, that helped loosen the conventions governing traditional painting and culture in the early 19th century.

The Romantic primacy of the senses found an expression in the appreciation of physical paint, visibly displayed on the picture surface. The early open air artists were the first to appreciate this quality of outdoor sketches, far before admission by the critical establishment. To us, long accustomed to painterly, physical works of art, a brushstroke came to

represent more than just the reality of paint itself. Rather, it is proof of human life in movement, the movement and selective touching by the artist's hand. It is in these marks and strokes, these signs of life, that our connection with artists of the past was most palpable and clear. In an industrial world determined to remove the visual evidence of the hand (*manus*) in manufacture, painting retains a unique status and the human proclivity to touch and mark explains its resilience and continuity.

Like the traditional open air artists before us, we find inspiration and reference for our studio works in focused outdoor efforts. These efforts take different forms. They may be small, rapid studies on paper as was the tradition, or they may be multiple layered works on



S. Stefano, Joe Vinson



Joe Vinson painting *Le Mammelle*