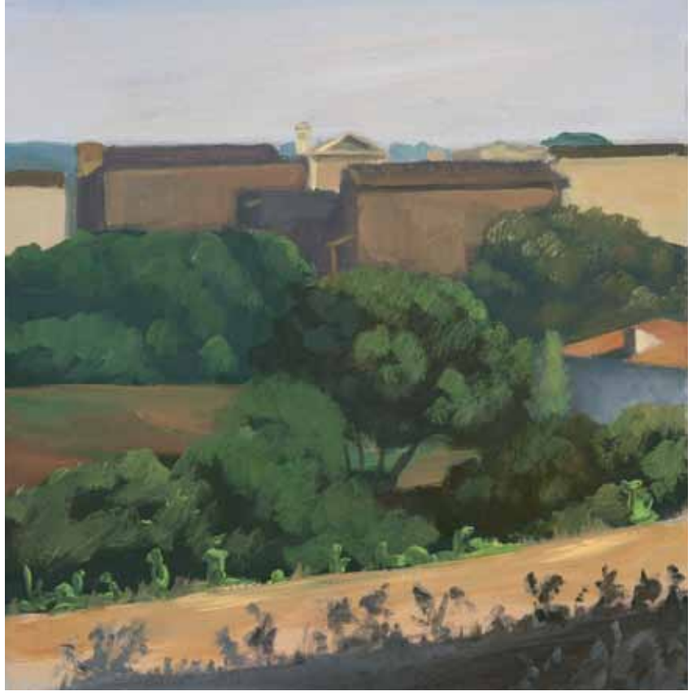
A Streamlined Method for Quick and Deliberate Outdoor Painting

Although plein air painting relies largely on spontaneity and intuitive reaction, thoughtful planning and deliberate decision making ensure that you will get the most out of your time on-site.

BY MADDINE INSALACO

OPPOSITE PAGE
Castelnuovo Tancredi
2011, oil on paper, 7 x 9. All artwork this article collection the artist.

RIGHT
Historic Center of Civita Castellana
2011, oil on paper, 7½ x 7.



Painting directly from nature is challenging due to the fugitive light and constantly changing atmospheric and environmental conditions. Although plein air paintings are prized for their spontaneity and freshness, one of the best ways to learn the art of plein air is to be methodical and deliberate. The approach presented here reflects my accumulated experience as an instructor of open-air painting for more than 15 years. My goal is to help beginner as well as advanced artists analyze the landscape and translate visual information into paint quickly—ideally in one session.

Landscape painting is primarily about depicting space. Plein air painting in particular focuses on capturing light on forms in space, and a sense of light can be communicated in a painting through the successful presentation of value contrasts, or *chiaroscuro*. Specifically, an artist must grasp the range of contrast between the light and dark sides of forms, the shadows they cast, and how these relationships change depending on a form's location in space. Often, beginner artists, in their enthusiasm to capture color, make pictures that have no light in them, as they fail to isolate the relative values of the color they see.

The illusion of space in a painting can be created using various pictorial devices. One such device is *overlap*—intersecting outlines of forms that indicate spatial relationship. Another is *relative position* on the field, which involves getting the correct proportions of the various compositional elements. For the landscape artist, the most important device used for spatial depiction is *atmospheric perspective*. Because this convention relies on the skillful use of value contrasts, it becomes a doubly important tool.

The concept of atmospheric perspective is simple: When objects recede in space, they become less distinct and more gray or blue, with gradual muting of values and cooling of colors as the quantity of intervening air increases. By comparison, elements in the nearer spaces will be described with warmer and more saturated colors. Although it is not always possible to see this phenomenon in the landscape, especially in shallow spaces and on dry days, a painting must be adjusted to reflect atmospheric perspective if the space is to be convincing.

In his advice to artists, Leonardo da Vinci mentioned varying the edges of forms and adding proportionally different amounts of blue into paint mixtures to reflect different distances in space. I prefer to think in terms of air, rather than the specific color blue. I suggest to students that they should add the sky colors to mixtures of landscape forms to create movement on the picture plane. The sky is, after all, air illuminated by the sun, and the color varies with humidity. By presenting the concept this way, I hope to encourage active thinking about actual spatial relationships in the landscape. It also helps for adjusting paint mixtures at different times of the day and under varying weather conditions when the sky is not blue.

AN APPROACH TO WORKING QUICKLY OUTDOORS

One of the best ways to ensure you are making the most of your time outdoors is to begin with a plan and approach the painting methodically from the start. In the excitement to begin painting, many artists jump right in and start covering the surface with color before the composition is clearly drawn and before they really analyze the subject, the space to be depicted, and its color in abstract pictorial terms. Further undermining the process is the failure to organize the palette in a logical way. Although the best and most exciting solutions in painting come from experimentation and impulse, good painting ultimately is an alliance between knowledge (intellect) and instinct (feeling). However, this should come only after the painting is started and organized thoughtfully. The method presented here saves time by finding the right color on the palette rather than on the picture surface.

Photo: Joe Vinson

THE PALETTE

Maintaining an organized palette helps you more carefully consider what you are painting. The first consideration is matching the palette itself to the picture surface.

Our perception of a color is affected by what surrounds it. If we mix colors on a dark palette and apply them to a light surface, the colors will appear different—what appears light on a dark palette will appear darker on a light surface. When we mix paint on a palette that is closely keyed to the surface, we take a small step toward color accuracy. In the sketches included in this article, I painted on an acid-free gray paper and used a gray palette paper for mixing.

It is important to keep the palette limited, as this makes it easier to recall mixtures later. Also, by limiting the palette one can get a better understanding of the properties of individual pigments. I advise students to stick to a maximum of eight colors. The pigments should be arranged along the palette edge in an order that reflects the relationships of value and then of temperature. Beginner artists who lack knowledge of pigments have no choice but to think in general terms of value and temperature when attempting to create mixtures that will represent elements in the landscape.

ABOVE
Insalaco worked with a student.

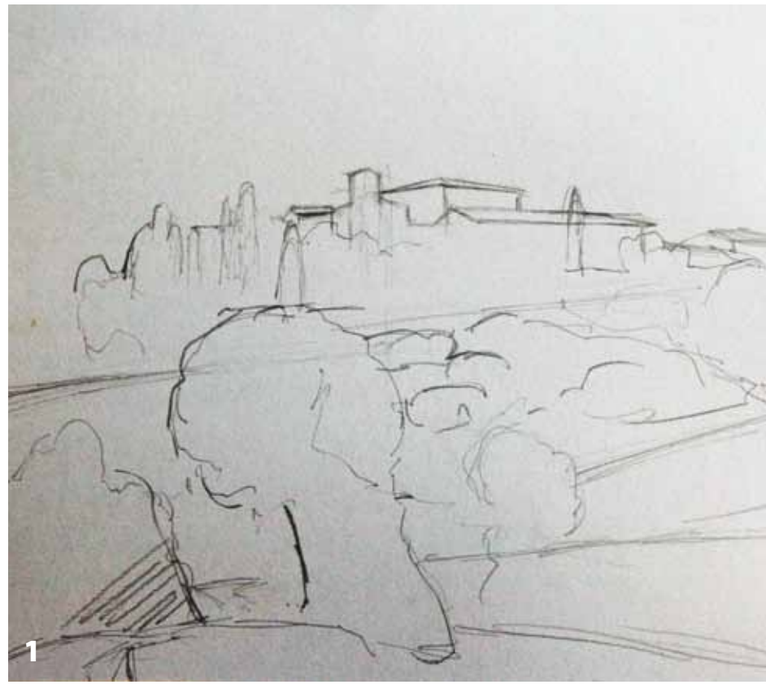
LEFT
Matching the palette and painting surface.

SKETCHING IN THE COMPOSITION

A preliminary sketch of the subject should be nothing more than a generalized drawing without any detail. Careful attention should be paid to achieving correct relationships among the proportions of the composition so that the space reads convincingly. Errors will be much harder to fix later when the paint is wet, and adjusting those errors will take valuable time away from resolving the picture. When I work on paper I sketch in the drawing with graphite, but if I am using a primed surface I prefer using a brush with turpentine wash.

VISUAL ANALYSIS AND PROJECTION

The next step is an exercise in looking, thinking, and analyzing, and it takes



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Step 1

DRAWING IN THE COMPOSITION

The artist began this demonstration by sketching in the major shapes and placement of the scene before her. She did this sketch after spending time analyzing the landscape from various angles and determining what she wanted to capture.

TOP
The scene that Insalaco painted for this demonstration was the village of Murlo, in Tuscany.

very little time. Study the motif, and identify the range of values you see. Make a mental note of where the lightest lights and darkest darks are. Think about the space that is to be depicted, the relative position of elements, and their shadows in the field. Even if the shifts in relative values are not necessarily visible, divide the subject into distinct zones that will require separate color treatment in developing the painting. Be aware that elements in the foreground will have more saturated and warmer mixtures than those in the distance. Once this dialogue is complete, mentally project an image of the composition onto the palette without drawing. Initially the artist will be working on two paintings of the subject simultaneously: one that will be developed on the painting surface; and an abstract one with adjacent color mixtures on the palette.

PREMIXING THE COLORS

Using palette knives only, mix pools of paint that reflect all the important areas of the composition projected on the palette. Mixtures should be juxtaposed on the palette in relationships, as they will appear on the surface. The purpose is to get the abstract relationships of color value and temperature in the pictorial space generally right before committing them to the surface.

The palette knife allows for the cleanest mixtures and is also the best tool for testing the color accuracy. Mix a uniform color, take the loaded knife, and place it with extended arm next to the element in the actual landscape that you are trying to mix, and

Step 2a

MIXING WITH A PALETTE KNIFE

One of the main tenets of Insalaco's open-air painting instruction is mixing the colors one sees in the landscape before beginning so that once the painting process starts there is nothing impeding the quick decision making that needs to follow.

Step 2b

TESTING THE MIXED COLOR

Once she had mixed her colors on the palette, the artist held the various mixtures up on her palette knife with an extended arm, to make sure the value and temperature of the color matched what she was observing in the landscape.

Step 2c

ADJUSTING FOR ATMOSPHERIC PERSPECTIVE

One needs to always keep atmospheric perspective in mind when mixing and laying down colors during plein air painting. Here Insalaco adjusted some of her mixtures, knowing that the elements in the foreground would have purer, more chromatic color and darker value than the objects in the distance, which would be more subdued, bluer, and lighter in value. She always has a sky mixture ready to mix into her other piles to account for how the color of the sky influences everything else in the landscape.

compare the color you've mixed to real life. For this test to be accurate, the light condition in which you view the paint has to match that of the element in the landscape. If you are painting in the shade and looking at a sunlit motif, you need to move into the sun to before you can judge whether your paint mixture truly captures the color you seek to convey. This testing technique works for all except backlit subjects, so I recommend that beginners choose subjects they can observe from a position where the sun is behind them.

At the outset you should mix a lot of paint—as much as needed to complete the painting. I usually mix twice as much sky color as I will need to paint the sky itself, because I will also use this mixture to adjust values in other mixtures to account for atmospheric perspective. For example, if I need to account for the color of the same type of tree in different planes of space, I will use a more saturated mixture of colors for the trees in the foreground and add some sky mixture for the trees that are farther back.

Thinking in terms of the actual air, I add my sky mixture to the spaces I perceive between elements in the landscape. And because all of the colors in a landscape are influenced by the reflected light of the sky, you should prepare and use a sky mixture even in paintings that do not have any sky in them.

It is not unusual to spend half an hour or longer on these color-mixing exercises. When all the general areas are mixed, the palette knives are no longer needed and the brushwork begins. Although all subsequent color adjustments will be made with brushes, a big advantage in having organized the palette with pre-mixed colors is that the mixtures are clean and the chance of making a painting with muddy colors is greatly reduced.

MIXED PALETTE

Before beginning to paint, Insalaco mixed colors for various landscape elements: clouds and sky (1, 2, and 3), the village (4), middle-distance trees (5), olive grove ground plane (6), light greens left of the road (7), dark and light foreground oak (8), olive trees (9), the road (10), and the foreground-right area (11).

Step 3a

LAYING IN COLORS BACK TO FRONT

The artist began laying in her colors. Her general rule is to work back to front, inside to outside, and under to over. "In this way the paint layers reflect the actual spatial relationships in the landscape," she observes.

Step 3b

BLOCKED-IN COMPOSITION

Thanks to accurate values, the initial block-in already yields a convincing three-dimensional effect.

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LAYING IN THE COMPOSITION

Starting from the distant space (at the top of the canvas) and moving gradually forward (toward the bottom), I lay in the colors as I have mixed them. My general rule is to work back to front (distant parts of the landscape first), inside to outside (for example, painting the darker inside parts of trees first, then the light on the leaves), and under to over (such as painting the earth before painting the grass growing on top of it). In this way, the paint layers reflect the actual spatial relationships in the landscape. I make exceptions for key things that might be subject to change, such as a shadow or a vehicle that could suddenly disappear or any small important notes of color that will be hard to paint in later. The colors I have mixed should already account for the atmospheric perspective of objects, such as the dark insides of tree forms, so that a simple blocked-in composition of flat shapes shows a sense of depth right away.

Photo: Joe Vinson

BELOW
Insalaco conducted a group critique for students in her Tuscany workshop.

Artist's Materials

PIGMENTS

- ultramarine blue
- raw umber
- permanent alizarin crimson
- chrome oxide green
- burnt sienna
- cadmium red
- yellow ochre
- cadmium yellow light
- lead white or a mixed titanium/zinc white

BRUSHES

assorted brushes, including at least one soft filbert

SURFACES

Insalaco uses either a range of unprimed, acid-free, hot-pressed smooth papers (the traditional surface of early open-air oil sketches) or canvas boards. Most of the paintings in this article were painted on Fabriano Elle Erre pearl-gray sheets, cut to size.

MEDIUMS

The artist's medium depends on what surface she is working on. For works on paper, she uses a traditional medium of linseed oil, damar varnish, and pure turpentine. For primed surfaces, she uses Liquin, which allows her to layer paint and alter the paint's viscosity as it starts to set during the course of a session. When working on surfaces with a neutral color, Insalaco recommends Jack Richeson Grey Matters Paper Palette.

OTHER

two palette knives (one for mixing and one for scraping the other clean)

DEVELOPING AND COMPLETING THE COMPOSITION

Once the painting is blocked in, I adjust the edges on forms with a dry brush according to where they are located in the pictorial space. The farther back the form, the less distinct the edge, whether it physically appears this way to me in the landscape or not.

The next step involves giving volume and light to the various forms. I tend to jump back and forth in the pictorial space as I carefully calibrate the contrasting relationships of color temperature and saturation. The original paint mixtures help with the general color composition, but they are never perfect, so they require fine-tuning. I start mixing with a brush at this stage, and the search for the right color becomes more experimental and instinctual even though it's motivated by formal considerations.

Step 4

ADJUSTING FOR SATURATION AND TEMPERATURE CONTRASTS

Insalaco added some highlights to the tops of the trees and various other details to create temperature and value contrasts that further brought the landscape to life.

BELOW, THE COMPLETED DEMONSTRATION:
Village of Murlo
2011, oil on paper, 7½ x 9½.

Photo: Joe Vinson

Because conditions are constantly changing outdoors, open-air painting is a dynamic process. The positive aspect of this is that the artist is offered different solutions to solving problems that arise within the composition. Therefore, when developing a painting it is important to remain open to new phenomena as they occur in the landscape. Something as simple as a new shadow describing the contour of a hill or a late-afternoon light raking across a copse of trees may be all that's necessary to create unity in the picture. By developing your painting gradually as a total unit—not piece by piece—you can respond to new information as it presents itself in the landscape.

Refining the ability to paint quickly outdoors has distinct benefits for artists of all levels. There is no better way to learn to see and mix colors than by studying them directly in nature. The camera may be a useful device for recalling the shape and design of an object, but to understand color one needs to look at it carefully for a sustained period of time. By studying a motif outdoors in natural light and struggling to assign colors to it, the job of mixing colors in the controlled light of the studio for other works becomes infinitely easier. Consistently painting in the open air will sharpen an artist's visual memory while generating sketches that can be used as references for future studio compositions. The key is to practice regularly and not be too concerned with the results when starting out. Like any skill, it can and will develop with experience.

FAR LEFT
Borghetto
2010, oil on paper, 6 x 6.

LEFT
Medieval Path and Oaks
2010, oil on paper, 9 x 12.

BELOW
House in Provence
2011, oil on paper, 4 x 7.

About the Artist

Maddine Insalaco is an American painter who divides her time between New York and Italy, where she teaches landscape painting with her artist-husband Joe Vinson. She received her M.F.A. from the New York Academy of Art and has lectured on the origins of plein air painting and its relevance in such venues as the Palm Springs Art Museum, in California, and Sotheby's, in New York City. Her work has been shown extensively in the United States and Italy, including at the Museum of Arts and Sciences, in Macon, Georgia. She is represented by Phyllis Lucas Gallery, in New York City; Ratio Gallery, in Bellport, New York; and Walker Fine Art, in Denver. Insalaco is the co-director of La Porta Gallery, in Buonconvento, Italy. For more information, visit www.landscapepainting.com.

The artist painting in Provence.