

Outdoor Painting Tips for the Plein Air Painter

9 TIPS FROM DOUG SWINTON



Almost any artist will tell you that there's a certain appeal to working outdoors that can't be found anywhere else. Outdoor painting is challenging to say the least but remember it's more about the process than the finished product. Below are 9 ways you can make the most of your next session en plain air.

1. Hey good lookin'.

Start with a good, long look. Painting landscapes lets you create work that can take the viewer on a journey into a new environment. To create a truly expressive work of art, it helps to take more than a cursory look around and quickly set up shop. Walk around, sit a spell. Nature will soon reveal itself if you're patient.

2. Simplicity is sophistication.

Whether it's a rocky cliff or a busy urban street, outdoor settings can offer a myriad of potential subjects. Sometimes however, it can be too much to take in and certainly too much to fit on to 8x10 canvas. To avoid a painting that feels busy, cluttered and lacking a centre of interest, don't paint the entire mountain range. Try just one peak. Not the entire street, just one door way.

3. Seize the light.

Light changes throughout the day, which makes accurately capturing it one of the biggest challenges of painting outdoors. The flip side is that when you are able to do this correctly, your painting is instantly elevated. Remember - if you have warm light you have cool shadows and vice versa. Observe with care.

4. Fly the friendly skies.

Cooler at the horizon and warmer at the zenith. Once you get some skill you can also change the colour from side to side. Areas closer to the light source will be warmer and cool down as they gain distance. When you consistently paint warm to cool on all shapes, the entire painting will feel unified.

5. Clint Squint.

Squint often. Squinting will allow you to dumb down the details and "focus" on the big shapes. You can't paint the fleas on the dog till you have painted the dog.

6. Small potatoes.

Paint smaller to start out. 6x8 or 8x10, until you get a handle on things. The light changes quickly and if you have a large canvas to cover you may get overwhelmed by having to make too many adjustments. Save the big guns until you attain a bit of skill.

7. Thermal reading.

Establish an overall temperature and try to achieve a 70/30 split between the warm and cool. Having a 50% warm and 50% cool painting invites boredom.

8. Lighter than light.

Keep your values lighter than you think you see. The sun is one big bright light bulb. Outdoor paintings tend to darken drastically when they're brought inside. Darks in particular will get a lot darker indoors. Keep things light and fresh.

9. Perfect imperfection.

You can spend all day looking for a "perfect" composition that just doesn't exist. Embrace the reality around you — smog, power lines, debris — and open yourself up to telling interesting stories with new subjects.

See you in the field.

Your friend in art,
Doug.

PS: Bug spray!