

Plein air painting 101: the basics ***by Sue Roach***

As many of you know, I am the coordinator for paint-outs, or plein air painting, for Nevada Watercolor Society. I am frequently asked by members what they need or what to expect as they have never tried painting outdoors before. So, I decided to write something for the newsletter to help newbies get started.

First, why paint outdoors? I have everything I need in my studio, and don't have to contend with weather, wind, bugs, or light changes. Now, I rarely create a masterpiece outdoors, but I do it to study the patterns that nature can teach us. It is an exercise that forces you to SEE. It is also a good exercise in narrowing your subject, and focusing on design and composition. The Impressionists painted outdoors because of the light. If you go to Red Rock Canyon, for example, it can be very overwhelming as to WHAT to paint. Look for the light and dark patterns, or something that just really attracts you. Oh yes, it is also FUN!

The most frequent questions I get, involve equipment. No special equipment is needed, really. You probably already have everything you need in your studio. First, it depends on WHERE you are going to paint. I like to select a place that has not only great views or subject matter, but some shade or protected area from the wind, and ...has a rest room nearby! Having a rest room isn't always necessary, but I think most of us require it, if we are going to be there for several hours. And it might also be a source of water, so you don't have to bring it with you.

You may choose to paint in your lap or on a small collapsible table. A small beach chair, umbrella chair or camp stool works great. This is not the time to do a full sheet watercolor, so work small, a quarter sheet or smaller to start. Blocks work well. Even post card sized blocks or watercolor journals can be fun. You can bring your regular pallet, but there are many travel pallets available. There are a variety of plein air or travel easels also, that include a pallet, water container, and a tripod. Many of us use the En Plein Air Pro Advanced Series Watercolor Easel, sold by Cheap Joe's for \$200. This package sets up quickly and easil and it all packs neatly into a bag. I love mine, but was surprised the price has gone up so much. Watch for a sale.

Getting back to WHERE you paint, may determine the amount of stuff you bring. If your location is right next to where you park, you can bring it all. However, if you are going to have to walk a ways to get to that primo spot, keep in mind you'll have to carry or drag everything. Backpacks can be used or you can use a rolling carrier if you have smooth sidewalks or paths. Some artists like to bring an umbrella that either mounts to their easel or sticks in the ground. These don't work well on windy days, and if the umbrella is colorful, it will make your white paper look different. Speaking of wind, you might want to anchor your easel with a jug of water, your backpack or a rock. Large Clips or clamps can also be useful for securing your paper to the easel.

I bring only a few brushes appropriate to the size of my paper. Pack paper towels, a collapsible water container, a small trash bag, a large brim hat, and any other item you'd bring for the season. Be careful with sunscreen, as it can transfer from your fingers to you watercolor paper.

So look around your studio supplies and see what you would bring on a paint-out. Consider the transportability as well as the use of each item. I hope this information was helpful. I'll be scheduling some group paint-outs soon, hope to see you there.

