

3 Outdoor Site Selection

ESSENTIAL CONCEPTS OF LANDSCAPE PAINTING

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Before the first daub of paint is squeezed out and brush is put to canvas, many painters have already set themselves up for failure. How? By selecting a subject that doesn't translate well into painting. Because a scene is beautiful does not necessarily make it a good subject. In plein air, or when photographing subjects that will be painted in the studio, it's essential that the painter find scenes that include the kinds of visual cues artists rely on to translate three-dimensional space (the real world) into the two-dimensional space of the canvas.

Still life or figurative work affords us the luxury of arranging our subject to suit our needs. We can pose the model or rearrange the fruits to suit our compositional preferences and we adjust the lights for good shadows that define form. But the landscape affords us no such luxury. We have no control over the position of the sun. It continually moves and changes the shadows, and it has a nasty habit of changing color. Therefore, "setting up" your subject in landscape is really about *selection* — choosing subjects that have clear patterns of light and shade to define the form, and are composed with appropriate spatial cues. All artists work with these cues, but in landscape, finding them is often a matter of putting oneself in the right place at the right time.

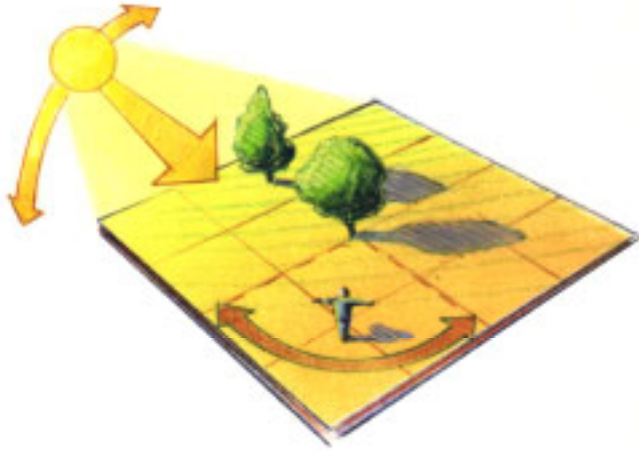
Subtle less obvious conditions are more difficult to analyze, so begin by working with a single strong light source to better acquaint yourself with the principles of light. – Kevin D. MacPherson, *Fill Your Oil Paintings with Light and Color*, p. 41.

The light upon your subject

Being at the right place. Painting in nature is not as simple as finding a beautiful scene that you like. Because of our keen depth perception, every scene appears three-dimensional. But not every scene presents depth in a way that the artist requires. Three-dimensionality in painting and drawing is always an illusion. So we should look for sites that present as many visual cues as possible that will bring depth into our "flat" two-dimensional paintings.

When you work outside, you can't move the light source and subject around like you can with a still-life. Instead, you have to move around the subject. In practical terms this means painting at the right time of day.

Where the sun is. Because the sun is lower in the sky in the morning and in the late afternoon, the light-side and shadow-side of forms are more clearly defined and noticeable. These are the best times to paint. At midday the defining shadows are diminished. Trees are likely to appear top lit and cast shadows are at a minimum. If you rely on these diminished cues, it will be much harder to describe form. Remember, while your depth perception allows you to always perceive reality as three-dimensional, there won't be any such depth perception in your painting unless you put it there.



Try to select a subject that offers the best view of cross light and shadow patterns. TIP: Stand facing the sun. Then raise your arms so your body forms a “T.” The direction your arms point are the two best directions from which to select your site, give or take. Avoid painting with the sun directly behind you or directly in front of you.

In the spring and summer, any time after sunrise to about 10 a.m. is ideal. The sun is lower in the sky, cross lighting forms in the landscape with defining shadows. If you like to sleep in, you can catch the crisp shadows a little later, in the afternoon beginning at 3 or 4 p.m. and until as late as 8 p.m. Of course, these times vary depending on the season and your latitude.

Depending on where you live, winter can be an ideal season (if you can stand painting with your mittens on). Not only does winter offer a unique palette of colors, the sun is always lower in the sky, never directly overhead, so it casts desirable patterns of light and shade throughout the day.

Where will the sun be? Pay attention to where the sun is headed. Say you’ve found a sunny spot filled with interesting shadows. Will the sun drop behind that tree in 10 minutes, taking all your interesting shadows with it? Also determine if the sun about to come up from behind a tree or building, which can change the light structure of your entire scene. It’s not uncommon for the plein air painter to move their easel every 15 minutes to keep themselves out of the sun and in the shade.

Where are you? Even if you paint at in the morning or late afternoon, you can still position yourself so that you won’t be able to take advantage of it! You can sit with the sun directly behind you or directly in front of you. Your subject becomes entirely backlit or front-lit, which hide the shadows altogether. Being at the right place—how you position yourself in relation to the angle of the sun—can be just as important as being there at the right time.

Is this to say you couldn’t that a good site can’t be had in the middle of the afternoon? Of course not. The point is that you want to work under conditions that will give you more of what you need, not less.

The light upon your painting

How many times have you found a great site, but couldn’t escape from the sun splashing right down on you and your painting? Site selection also involves making sure that the light that falls on you and your painting doesn’t work against you.

Avoid placing your palette or canvas in direct sunlight. Direct sunlight can be very deceptive. Colors appear intensely brilliant and saturated, but will actually be very distorted if you try to mimic that intensity with your paint. Sunlight is not a normal viewing light because it is simply too bright. Although the landscape you are painting can be under full sunlight, you and your painting should not be.

Make sure the palette and canvas receive equal light. A single color will appear different under lights of differing brightness. An awareness of this is crucial to the painter, especially when working outdoors, where the light cannot be controlled. Imagine your difficulty if every time you mixed a color and applied it to the canvas, it appeared either darker or lighter than you intended. You'd spend all your time trying to compensate for the difference. This is exactly the problem you'll face if the light on the canvas and palette is not balanced.

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Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

Figure 1. Canvas and palette are both in full sun. Not only is this blinding to look at, the apparent brilliance of the colors are deceptive. Soft shade or filtered light (Figure 3) is closer to a true viewing light.

Figure 2. In the worst possible arrangement, the palette is sun-struck while the canvas is in shadow (or vice versa). This imbalance in brightness makes mixing the colors you want almost impossible.

Figure 3. A balanced light is achieved as both palette and canvas are bathed in the same soft, diffuse shade. Colors mixed on the palette are much more likely to be the color you want when applied to the canvas. Shade is also closer to the light you will find indoors where the painting will be viewed.

Figure 4. At times there is be no refuge from the sun. Sometimes you can create some shade on your palette and canvas by turning the easel so the canvas casts a shadow on the palette. Prop some cardboard behind the canvas to block any stray light.



TIP: At times having an equal amount of light on your canvas and palette is difficult to achieve. Try standing palette vertically, on the same plane as your canvas. This ensures that the colors you mix will appear the same when you put them on your canvas.

Setup Tips

Try to work from a softly shaded spot. Under a tree or in the cast shadow of a building, for example, will give you a soft, diffuse light that will tend to keep the light on the canvas and palette relatively equalized. Soft shade is also closer to a indoor viewing light.

If a softly shaded spot is not accessible, you might have to work in direct sunlight. The best way to deal with this is to use a beach umbrella with a clamp which can attach to your easel. This allows you to make your own shade wherever you chose to paint. If you don't use an umbrella, the only other alternative (and much trickier) is to rotate your setup and tilt the painting so that it blocks the sun. Because it's upright, the painting surface is more likely to be shaded, and you might be able to get it to casts a shadow over the palette.

Beach umbrella. By far, an adjustable artists umbrella allow you to paint nearly anywhere. By adjusting the tilt of the umbrella you can create your own soft shade.