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LANDSCAPE PAINTING TECHNIQUES:

Painting Light and
Shadow in Your
Landscape Art

Landscape Painting with Watercolor

13 TIPS FOR OUTDOOR PAINTING SUCCESS.

by Bob Bahr

Last fall Joseph Bohler taught in Dubois, Wyoming, at the invitation of the Susan Kathleen Black Foundation for their annual weeklong workshop near Grand Teton National Park, in Wyoming. Other artists joined the painting group with much dash and panache, but Bohler sat quietly in his black cowboy hat talking with an acquaintance. The tone was already set. A few days later, he was painting a demonstration at nearby Brooks Lake, affably answering students' questions, commenting on the dogs fetching sticks thrown in the lake, and creating a pretty good painting. (Bohler ended up entering this quick demo in a prestigious national exhibition.) It was evident that what the instructor meant by "good attitude" was not limited to high expectations for the finished piece. He chatted with the students on a wide variety of topics as he worked—from his childhood experiences on a Montana ranch to the musical merits of the mandolin. He answered questions about his color mixtures and painting decisions in a casual tone and seemed to deeply enjoy the day, the company, and the setting.

Bohler believes in being fully present during a painting session. That's one reason he prefers to work en plein air, and why, **although he is an avid music fan and skilled musician, he never**



ABOVE
Bohler helped Joy Nguyen with one of her first forays into watercolor painting.

TOP
Bohler advised a student on how to depict what could be an overwhelming vista.

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TOP
Artist Chelley Lowder was always accompanied by her dog during the workshop.

RIGHT
John P. Finley, a lifetime resident of the area, painted the view of Brooks Lake.

wears headphones on-site. “I couldn’t hear that dog splashing in the water or those grasshoppers snapping their wings if I were wearing headphones,” he points out. Bohler occasionally uses a microcassette tape recorder to capture the sound of water or nearby horses, and he will scribble in a journal to note the smells, the temperature, or how he feels at that moment. He takes reference photos, but it’s clear he is in his element painting outdoors. “It’s natural—everybody starts out using photo reference. But you get the best possible information in front of you when you paint plein air,” he comments. “Once you can break away from using a photo, you are free. You feel like a bird leaving its nest.”

Being physically present does infuse the painting with life, but painting on-site has its challenges—not the least of which is all the information present outside of a reference photo. On-site, there



Workshop participants shared Brooks Lake with some fishermen.

are many distracting and enticing things beyond the subject of your composition. The artist recommends spending some time “tasting the flavor” of a location and looking around 360 degrees before setting up. **“Find your spot, find the subject, focus in, and go for it,”** Bohler advises. **“Don’t look around the whole time wondering about other views.”** A glance at a few of his finished paintings shows how uncluttered, organized, and condensed he likes his compositions to be. A look at the reference photo for his demonstration *Bunkhouse on Horse Creek* illustrates how Bohler can accomplish this even when the source material is a busy scene. How many artists could have resisted putting in the horses that were milling around in the pen behind the red building? Or the challenge of the glass-paned plant box beside the door? Bohler, in contrast, barely suggested the complicated fence structure and eliminated the box, and the composition reads much better for it.

During the Wyoming workshop,

Bohler needed to remind several students that **a good preliminary drawing is necessary for most watercolor success.** Bohler’s underdrawings are careful and nuanced, even though they are merely marking the basic shapes of elements and the areas where lighted portions give way to shadows. His next piece of advice echoes the words of most workshop instructors: **Use a big brush and get the big shapes down on the surface.** Bohler does this with a two-inch flat brush and very juicy washes of light transparent watercolor. **He may then erase some of the darker graphite lines of the underdrawing. At this and every step, the artist stresses that he is concentrating on capturing the feel of the scene.** “I’m not trying to put the world in a 16”-x-21” painting,” Bohler explains. **“Just the essence of the area. The big shapes can suggest it all.** Students sometimes jump ahead and put in details with a little brush, without having a good foundation underneath.”

Bohler makes frequent use of the

drybrush technique, loading the flat brush with fairly dry paint and lightly scraping it over the texture of the paper, leaving highlights of the color that strongly suggest textures ranging from the surface of rocks to accents of color on grasses to sunlit spots on water. These touches, along with a strong sense of composition and an uncanny ability to use the unique traits of watercolor to conjure a scene, suggest a highly controlled painting technique. So it seems like a miracle to witness Bohler’s demeanor while painting. He exudes the relaxed manner and calm, satisfied air of a man lazily fishing. Don’t be fooled. **“I take painting very seriously, even though I am laid back about things,”** says the instructor. **“It’s a joyful experience, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t serious. It’s a lot of hard work.”**

Bohler makes it look exceedingly easy, but his tours during workshops to check the progress of the students found a few of them struggling to do



Colorado watercolorist Joseph Bohler painted a demonstration on a working ranch outside of Dubois, Wyoming.

Bohler's work is definitely not faddish. **In fact, it seems to prefer the past to the trends of the moment.** "I paint a lot of old things," he says. "An old, leaning, weathered barn—all the textures and character of it appeal to me. I grew up around old stuff. I drove a team of horses—Toots and Molly—when I was younger. So all of this is in me." His story is further fleshed out when one considers that the name of his online gallery is *Places in Time*, and that the music he coaxes out of any piano he sees is a mixture of blues, ragtime, and boogie-woogie, with a trace of Hank

Snow and Western swing thrown in. This aesthetic drenches his work, to the point that a landscape he paints today, even with no man-made structures in it to date it, seems to hover in time, reinforcing the antiquity of the hills and the timelessness of the forest. Even his choice of medium seems to evoke a place in time, and the endless cycles of nature. "I enjoy watercolor's spontaneous sparkle and flirtatious nature as the paint and water caress the paper surface and the creative process begins and ends ... and begins again," he writes in the workshop handout.

A quietness about his teaching and painting reinforces this aura, which is marked by another important trait: optimism. Bohler's low-key nature could be mistakenly interpreted as melancholy, but he feels it is better described as sensitivity. This is coupled with positivity. **"Attitude is such a big part of this," he says. "You have to try to do your best every day. You can never think, I'm going out to paint another disaster today. You should say, 'I want to go out there and do my best.'**

what he could achieve with a few deft strokes. The instructor would often ask permission, then pick up the brush to demonstrate a concept. Sometimes Bohler would simply recommend that the workshop participant dramatically change course or start the painting again. **The emphasis was on using the workshop to learn and to stretch—and, more than with many workshop instructors, to become acquainted with the teacher's philosophy on art.**

A handout that Bohler uses for workshops states that "The life that begins when light meets form, and the two become one, is sacred to me." **He goes on to explain that he tries to paint what he loves, and that he has progressed beyond painting strictly from the intellect to painting primarily from the heart.** Bohler says this mindset has him seeking out and depicting the things in life he finds beautiful—be it a landscape, a woman, or an old building. "I've never worried about style or technique, or the fads that come and go, but try to be consistent with quality, with my chosen interpretations of nature and mankind."

It's all about confidence."

Bohler may paint in watercolor, but students of all media are welcome in his workshops. "When students are using a variety of media I teach not only watercolor but good painting principles—such as values, composition, textures, and rhythm—that apply to all artists," says the instructor. "My goal is to nudge each person to the next level of artistic confidence and ability. If you learn one or two important lessons from this workshop, your energy will have been well spent." ■

**ABOUT
THE ARTIST**

Joseph Bohler is a founding member of the Northwest Rendezvous; a life member of the Transparent Watercolor Society of America; a signature member of the American Watercolor Society, the Watercolor USA Honor Society, and the Rocky Mountain National Watermedia Society; and a peer-elected member of the National Academy of Western Art. The artist has been featured in several books and magazines, including *Splash II* and *Splash IV* (both North Light Books, Cincinnati, Ohio) and his art is in the permanent collection of several institutions. In the early 1990s Bohler was commissioned to paint a portrait of Tex Ritter by the sons of the famous actor and singer and by the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, in Oklahoma City. Bohler is also a gifted pianist and has released two CDs. For more information on Bohler, visit www.placesintime.com.

DEMONSTRATION: BUNKHOUSE ON HORSE CREEK



Reference

Bohler liked this building, but he thought the background was a bit busy. "I'll eliminate more than half of the trees back there," he told the workshop participants. "I am going for the essence." He purposely chose a busy scene that he would have to simplify so the students could witness this concept.

Step 1

The artist lightly sketched the composition using a 2B graphite pencil.



1

Step 2

Bohler began with the center of interest: the building. He made sure to let plenty of pigment indicate the darks under the eaves and used broken lines to show the edges of the logs. He laid in the sky first to avoid possibly lifting the tree-trunk color that would get painted later.



2

Step 3

The trees on the right side were added using Prussian green and Winsor yellow. The mountains in the distance were painted with a blue mixture. Bohler designed the foreground to lead the eye through the painting, not necessarily as an accurate depiction of the scene. For similar reasons, he added a few imagined items and leaned them against the front of the building. He dabbed a bit of drybrush to suggest leaves and "to break up the clunkiness of it."



3

Continued...

Step 4

Bohler colored in the white spots on the roof. “I had left them there in case I needed them,” he said, “but I don’t need them.” He dabbed some dark areas with a clean, wet brush to lift pigment for highlights. Bohler reinforced the shadows under the eaves with ultramarine blue and permanent rose and touched in some sky holes in the trees using cobalt blue. Note how much Bohler simplified the fence on the left.



Step 5

Bohler added shadows under vegetation, painted in some dark accents on the left with a mud color to emphasize various forms, and dragged some permanent rose along the top of the bushes on the right with a drybrush to add texture and color. “A mixture of permanent rose and burnt sienna is great for foliage in this part of the country,” the artist pointed out. “It fits how much brown there is in the greens.”

THE COMPLETED PAINTING:

Bunkhouse on Horse Creek
2007, watercolor, 16 x 21.
Collection the artist



DEMONSTRATION: MORNING AT BROOKS LAKE—WYOMING



Reference

The instructor said he chose this view partly because he liked how the dark trees on the right were set against the background bluff in sunlight and shadow. The focal point would be where this cluster of dark trees cuts into the water.

Step 1

His light, loose graphite sketch started with the horizon line on the far shore. Next, he sketched in the treeline on the right, and then drew the outline of the mountains, taking care to mark areas of warm and cool colors. The artist made up and drew a bush on the bottom left corner to keep the viewer's eye from leaving the composition. After looking over his work, Bohler decided to adjust the painting a bit by emphasizing the vertical nature of the trees on the right.

Step 2

With a flat two-inch brush, Bohler washed in the sky with cobalt blue. His brush was fully loaded, and the juicy wash ran down in a couple of places to the horizon line, but Bohler quickly stopped it with paper towel. He used the paper towel to pull off the wash in areas of the sky to create clouds. The artist said he was thinking of the sky as the “quiet area” of the painting. He tilted his painting so it would catch the full brunt of the sunlight and dry quickly so he could move on to the next step.



Continued...

Step 3

Bohler erased some of the darker graphite lines and then started in on the bluff in the middle right of the painting using a mixture of ultramarine blue with a touch of Indian red and permanent rose. He varied the wash, mixing in a little raw sienna, but was careful to keep the bluffs cool because they were in shadow. To reserve some lights, the artist dipped his brush in clean water and pulled some of the pigment off.

Step 4

His attention turned next to the warm cliffs on the left. Using a mixture of permanent rose, raw sienna, and a touch of cadmium red, he washed in the basic shape of the cliffs, then added Winsor yellow and a bit more cadmium red for brighter areas. Bohler allowed his brush to get drier as he worked, which resulted in heavier pigment and increased texture. A mix of raw sienna and ultramarine blue reinforced some of the shadow areas on the cliffs. He scrubbed out some areas to soften the edges and to allow another color to go there later.

Step 5

Prussian green with a touch of cadmium red created the tree color for the foothills on the right. A smaller brush allowed Bohler to indicate trees on the distant hills. He painted in the sunlit portion of the large pines on the left using Winsor yellow, Prussian green, and cadmium scarlet, then made a darker mixture to create the shadowed parts of the pines. The value range for the painting was now established with this darkest dark. For veracity and variety, Bohler painted in some of the trees killed by a pine beetle infestation using Indian red and burnt sienna, mixing the bottoms of the trees in with the previously laid down green to tie them into the landscape.

Continued...



Step 6

The artist next concentrated on the far shore, starting with a saturated line of color for the vegetation closest to the lake's edge, then switching to a lighter, more watery mix of Prussian green and cadmium scarlet for the foothills. Deft flicks of a drybrush created individual trees or clumps of trees. The artist felt that some of the yellows in the cliffs needed to be toned down, so he wet his brush, dabbed at the area, and pulled up the pigment with a paper towel. A yellow mixture with a touch of cadmium red served as a wash to block in the far shoreline and the foreground vegetation. "I'll come back and add texture," he assured the assembled students.

Step 7

The artist blocked in the water using ultramarine blue with a touch of burnt sienna. He mixed a darker, richer green for the foothill trees using burnt sienna, Winsor yellow, and Prussian green, and drybrushed this mixture on the area to warm it up. After blocking in the foreground bushes, he added dark browns to those areas. "Now the grass has really come alive," observed Bohler. He added touches of color to the foreground hills "to get the essence of the area." Blue shadows in the trees on the right reinforced the light source. Texture on the far shoreline and darker water along the edge made the scene more convincing.

Step 8

Dark twigs in the foreground bushes, darker shadows in the far-right cliffs, more color and detail in the upper left, and a bit of scumbled cadmium scarlet here and there finished the demonstration.

Morning at Brooks Lake—Wyoming
2007, watercolor, 16 x 21. Collection the artist.



Landscape Painting with Oil

IMPROVE YOUR OIL PAINTING IN 8 STEPS.

by **M. Stephen Doherty**

After attending the University of New Orleans, Chris McHenry worked for 10 years as a billboard painter, covering 14'-x-48' signs with realistic oil paintings while suspended on a scaffold high above city streets and roadways. He gained a special appreciation for James Rosenquist, the Pop Art painter who started his career in the same profession, and for other artists who achieved sharply focused, highly detailed realism in their work. In his spare time, McHenry applied his understanding of realistic painting to the execution of easel pictures.

After three years of working evenings and weekends on canvases, McHenry put eight of his oil paintings in a group show and waited for collectors to discover him. They didn't. But fortunately a private dealer, Marie Park, called to say some of her clients might be interested in four of his Dallas scenes. Within a few days, Park sold the canvases and was elated, especially because he was growing weary of painting billboards in the 100-plus temperatures during Texas summers. The artist decided it was time to pursue his interest in fine art on a full-time basis.



Approaching Storm
2005, oil, 40 x 50.
Collection the artist.



Lost Mine Trail
2006, oil, 40 x 50. Collection the artist.

A billboard painter can create a believable, realistic illusion with a variety of techniques that suggest a lot of detail, even when there isn't any. That's a vital part of what sign and scenic painters need to know to complete their work in the shortest amount of time. If a porous sponge, a stiff housepainting brush, or a paint roller can help artists paint a believable image of a slice of bread, a soft-drink bottle, or the face of a movie star in a relatively short amount of time, then that's the tool to use. **The key is creating enough contrast in the textures, light and dark patterns, colors, and edges for the objects to look realistic** when viewed by passing motorists or pedestrians. It's much the same as the difference between looking at a Monet painting up close or from a distance. When you stand next to the canvas it appears to

be an abstract pattern of random brush marks, but when you stand back several feet those marks coalesce into a cathedral, a haystack, or a lily pond.

Having this understanding of the painting process, in addition to the discipline required by a demanding job, McHenry quickly created a number of other city landscapes filled with buildings, streets, and vehicles all rendered in accurate perspective and with realistic detail. Soon his interests expanded to include pure landscapes, particularly those around White Rock Lake, a large urban park near McHenry and his wife's home. "I paint around the lake almost every day," McHenry explains. "I use a French easel I've had for about 15 years to create small plein air landscapes. If a painting turns out particularly well, I use it and reference photographs as the basis

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Chris McHenry studied art at the University of New Orleans; architecture at Louisiana Tech University, in Ruston; and multimedia design at Richland College, in Dallas. He has exhibited his paintings in New York City at the Sherry French Gallery; in Dallas at the Bath House Cultural Center, Neiman Marcus, and the Dallas Convention Center; in Hot Springs, Arkansas, at St. Joseph's Mercy Health Center; and in Jackson, Wyoming, during the Arts for the Parks competition (1991, Top 100). For more information on McHenry, visit his website: www.chrismchenry.com.



of a larger studio painting. **Sometimes I'm able to complete a fairly large painting on location by returning to the same location at the same time of day.** For example, I painted *St. John's Avenue* in four weeks of painting every day for three to five hours." About a year ago the artist bought a smaller pochade box at a garage sale and adapted it with a tripod mount so he would have a lighter-weight, more portable painting easel to use on location.

Always mindful of how to achieve optimum results in the least amount of time, McHenry works with thick paint on location rather than the thin glazes of color he uses in the studio. "I don't apply an initial thin wash of color on location as some artists do because I prefer to work wet-in-wet from start to finish," he explains. **"I generally work from the background to the foreground, and from the top of the canvas to the bottom. That is, from the sky and distant shapes toward the larger, more sharply defined foreground elements.** Working with fairly thick paint, I paint the sky and background once and often don't have to modify them later. I then make an effort to cover the rest of the white canvas with paint and later go back to resolve details. The foreground usually has the greatest amount of paint because the texture of the oils adds more contrast and structure."

In recent years McHenry has taken advantage of his com-

puter to help evaluate the potential of a plein air sketch and the possible adjustments that might be made. **"If I want to enlarge an oil sketch into a studio painting, I will often do a compositional drawing or color study to determine what changes would improve the composition;** or I will scan the oil sketch into my computer and use the features of Photoshop to add or subtract trees, move mountains, change values or colors, or alter the proportions of the rectangle," he explains. **"My hand is always the best tool to work with, but digital photography and computer software help me make better use of the marks my hand makes with a brush or pencil."**

McHenry follows the traditional method of building up the surface of his studio paintings from thin to thick applications of oil color, often adding small amounts of fast-drying Liquin alkyd medium or cobalt dryer to the first layers of paint to speed up the drying time. "In recent years I have gone back to working on oil-primed linen canvas because the surface is smooth and lends itself to painting fine details," the artist explains. **"I begin painting with thin washes of color and gradually build from thin darks to thick highlights. I paint the big shapes defined by the pattern of the sunlight and shadow, and I keep in mind the balance of warm and cool colors that establishes the sense of depth and focus.** I then spend about



West Bay
2005, oil, 20 x 60.
Courtesy Marie Park.

four to eight weeks developing smaller and smaller areas of the scene until I am ready to punch in the strong darks and bright highlights. I think it was the 19th-century French painter Corot who said that the highlights added at the end of the painting process really make or break a painting, so I consider those very carefully.”

Although McHenry prefers to base his studio paintings primarily on small drawings or paintings completed on location, he does take digital photographs of potential subjects, especially if he is far from home and knows he has a limited amount of time. “I drove 11 hours to reach Big Bend National Park, in the far west of Texas, and spent a week making sketches and taking photographs,” McHenry remembers. “I had a great time and came back with lots of sketches and photographs I wanted to use as the basis of large studio pictures. Some of the locations were quite a distance from the roads, and if I hadn’t taken photographs as I went, I wouldn’t have come away with enough material to produce paintings for a strong exhibition. For example, *Lost Mine Trail* was based on photographs I took after a mile-long hike into the mountains.

As many others have said, **if artists spend enough time painting on location, they are better able to interpret the information in a photograph.**”

Some collectors who take an interest in McHenry’s work commission him to create paintings that include their home, boat, or property. “In a couple of situations I was able to take photographs of a collector’s boat or vacation home and paint it into a shoreline scene in such a way that it didn’t radically change the painting,” the artist explains. “In other situations I had to create a completely new painting, so I first made a sketch in gouache or oil to show the person what I had in mind. Once that met with their approval, I developed the larger studio oil from the sketches and my photographs.”

McHenry has been successful selling his landscapes to collectors in the Dallas area, and he has shown a few of his oils in New York City. He is now aiming to expand his market, particularly with paintings of Big Bend National Park, a subject that will certainly appeal to a wide audience of art lovers in Texas. ■



Mimi's Garden
2003, oil, 15 x 40.
Private collection.

DEMONSTRATION: APRIL AFTERNOON

Step 1

McHenry first completed this 9"-x-12" plein air oil study on location.

Step 2

Back in his Dallas studio, he referred to the oil study and photographs to carefully draw the outlines of the landscape elements he wanted to include in his painting on a 24"-x-32" oil-primed linen canvas.

Continued...





Step 3

Using fairly thin mixtures of oil color, the artist painted the cloud formation in the background. He typically works from background to foreground elements, and from the top to the bottom of a canvas.

Step 4

McHenry then painted the distant grove of trees using oil colors thinned with Liquin alkyd medium that would speed up the drying time, thus making it easier to overlap the foreground trees.

Step 5

Because the artist works for 10 or 11 hours every day indoors, he is able to develop a greater amount of detail in his studio paintings than he can on location. You can see at this stage he is developing details in the shoreline scene.

Continued...





Step 6

After covering the entire canvas with oil color, McHenry went back into sections of the landscape to add refinements and subtle transitions of colors and values.



THE COMPLETED PAINTING:
April Afternoon
2006, oil, 24 x 32.
Collection the artist.