

Anatomy of a Plein Air Painting

Landscapes are about space and light. The most commonly implemented cues for defining space are value differences and overlapping forms. But there are several others — a sound color strategy including cool and warm relationships, atmospheric perspective, edges, and transparency, opacity and texture.

Simplification. Detail and complexity are incongruous with plein air painting. The many forms and details must be reduced to their lowest common denominator, masses that block out the broad shapes. This view was extracted from a vastly larger panorama. By limiting my focus (excluding more than I include) I support the idea of simplification.

The color of the sky informs the land. Skies are not always blue, particularly at sunrise and sunset. Nor are they simply a curtain that hangs behind the landscape. The sky is the source of the color-light that fills the landscape. Squint at the glare on the horizon and see if you can discern hints of yellow, pink, or orange.

Atmospheric Perspective. Colors become bluer and lighter/paler as they get farther away. This is a visual constant that viewers are familiar with, so it's a very reliable cue for indicating distance and space.

Warm/cool relationships are a key color attribute. Remember, cool and warm is a relative reference. Colors tend to be cooler or warmer; less cool or more warm. There is always some shift in cool/warm between light and shade, as well as a hue shift. When modeling form, the colors in the light and in the shade are often made up of the same color combinations, but in differing proportions.

Edges. Forms are defined in space not only by overlapping them, but by controlling the relative softness or hardness of their edges. Softening an edge helps turn the form in space or set it back. Note the fuzzy edge of the background trees. Sharper edges can separate it from the background or draw attention to it.

Value. Even in paintings that are "about" color, correct value masses are essential. In deep shadow this large mass of trees was generally cool and therefore tended to recede. I inserted small touches of warmer green to help bring it forward.

Color harmony. It is not possible to actually copy the colors you see. Instead, you rely on a color strategy that uses a compatible set of colors to *simulate* the color experience. One of the reasons this painting has a unified color of light is because it uses an analogous harmony color scheme. Colors adjacent to each other in the spectrum (blue/green/yellow in this example) tend to be the most closely related. Contrasting accents are offered in the red bush in foreground and the red-orange in the sky.



Consider changes in opacity and transparency between the light and shadow. Traditionally, artists use thinner or more transparent paint in the shadows and reserve the thickest or most opaque paint for the lights. This becomes a tactile metaphor for light as substance. The less light (in shadows) the less substance. The more light, the more substance.

Texture as a metaphor for space. The thickness of the paint can serve as a metaphor for distance. Thinner, more transparent layers are reserved for far distances and shadows. Thicker, more opaque paint is reserved for nearer objects.