

Plein Air Painting Preparation

Helpful Plein Air Information

- What to Expect When Painting Outdoors
- Using a Supply Checklist
- Plein Air Painting Setups
- Using Sketching Thumbnails

by Wanda McDonald - 2020

Helpful Plein Information

- Plein Air Painting should be fun. You're not out there doing a masterpiece, so no pressure, just enjoy the moment!
- If you have never tried painting outdoors, you may want to just do your first outdoor painting in your own backyard or on your balcony.
- Having a checklist of the items you need to take will help make it more enjoyable. Nothing worse than arriving at your destination to discover you've forgotten that all important, tube of white paint, or your water container or maybe even your brushes that you thought were in your brush carrier. This has even happened to seasoned plein air painters. So double check your gear before you head out.
- Plan on doing a 2 hour outdoor painting session. This is from the time you arrive at your location and set up. Of course there are times when you may do a full day plein air event.
- If you've purchased a new painting setup do a trial run in your backyard. You do not want to end up out in the field and can't figure out how to setup it up.
- Plein air painting is generally used to do studies on small substrates like 8 x 10, 9 x 12 or 11 x 14.
- You need to paint quickly if you are planning on completing your study. But you can also just do a limited study capturing the light, shadows, colours and shapes and then use this study as reference along with photos to do larger paintings in your home studio.
- If your medium is oil or acrylic you may want to consider taking only a few tubes of paint to help lighten your load. Using a co-primary palette of yellow, red and blue (one warm and one cool of each) plus white, and one earth tone (like burnt umber) this helps to create a cohesive painting study.
- Try not to spend a lot of time scoping out that all allusive perfect location with the great composition. Most of the time it does not exist. Just try standing in a spot that's pleasing to you and do a slow 360 degree turn and pick what you think would make you happy to paint.
- Once you've found your scene, use your viewfinder for both landscape and portrait views. The Viewfinder helps you to limit what is in front of you so you do not become overwhelmed by the vastness of the outdoors.

- Find your area of interest, even if it means moving it to make a more pleasing composition. The only time you need to make your painting look exactly like your subject is if it's a worldly or locally well-known location or iconic building.
- Try to set up your easel so that the sun is in front of you. If the sun is shining on your substrate, you're likely to paint too dark. It may look light outdoors, but as soon as you bring it indoors it will be much darker. If you do set up with the sun behind you, make sure your easel is shaded – some artists actually use an umbrella for this, but having a bush or tree behind you helps. Also do not wear sunglasses when painting. Wear a hat with a brim!
- Now that you're setup and have found your subject, it's a good idea to do a couple of greyscale thumbnail sketches to decide on your composition as well as the darkest and lightest value placements. You need to capture this, as the light changes quickly outdoors.
- Thumbnail cards are handy for drawing an outline in your sketchbook to ensure your sketch will work with your substrate size. For example if your substrate is 9 x 12 your thumbnail would be 3 x 4.
- Take a few photos of your scene before you start painting so that you capture the light and shadow. Photos are helpful for added reference should you decide to do a larger painting at home. Your studio painting does need to be done in the same medium as your colour study.
- Painting in the early morning or end of afternoon/early evening is good for capturing long cast shadows.
- Overcast days are also nice for painting. The values will be much closer and shadows will have soft edges rather than sharp edges that you get on sunny days. Just because the day feels dull does not mean your painting has to be dreary. You can paint a colourful underpainting or tone your substrate so that your painting will read overcast yet have a colourful feel to it.
- When packing up, never pour out your paint water (take it home for disposal) and collect all your used paper towels food wrappers, used water bottles, etc. Leaving the spot you painted in as pristine as it was when you arrived.

Plein Air Links:

- Abbotsford Plein Air Pals page <http://www.wgmcdonald/apap>
- Outdoor Painter (the home of *PleinAir* magazine) – Tips for painting outdoors: <https://www.outdoorpainter.com/category/ck17-tips/>
- Plein Air Presentation and other art tips/techniques can be found here: www.fvwatermediasociety.com/tips-techniques

Plein Air Checklist for Watercolour, Gouache, Sketching, Acrylic, Oil & Pastel

*Remember, Plein Air Painting is mainly for doing studies,
so your substrate size should be small i.e. 8 x 10, 9 x 12, 11 x 14*

General Supplies for Everyone – No matter what medium you paint in.

- Easel: there's a variety of sketching or portable easels on the market which are light to carry and fold up.
- Folding Chair
- Sun hat/ glasses/jacket
- Umbrella for sun/rain (*this is optional*)
- Garbage bag
- Camera
- Snack and bottle of drinking water
- Phone

Acrylics

- A selection of acrylic paints (try using a co-primary palette -2 yellows, 2 reds, 2 blues, Burnt Umber and Titanium White)
- 2-4 brushes/palette knife
- Small Sketchbook, small ruler and a pencil or pen for sketching
- Viewfinder
- Bottle of water
- Spritz bottle
- Cup for washing brushes
- Paper towels or cloth for wiping brushes on
- Stay Wet Palette (paper palette is nice)
- Substrate: Paper, board, or canvas
- An empty bottle for pouring dirty paint water into, for disposable back home.
- Latex gloves to keep hands clean
- Pochade box with easel that attaches to your tripod (if you have one)

Traditional Oils or Water-Mixable Oils

- A selection of oil paints (try using a co-primary palette -2 yellows, 2 reds, 2 blues, Burnt Umber and Titanium White)
- 2-4 brushes/palette knife
- Small Sketchbook, small ruler and a pencil or pen for sketching
- Viewfinder
- Medium – solvent free gel for traditional oils or a medium made for water-mixable oils & dipper
- Paper towels or cloth for wiping brushes on
- Palette (paper palette is nice)
- Substrate: Paper, board, or canvas
- If using Water-mixable oils: bottled water & Spritz bottle. If using traditional oils: safflower oil or odorless mineral spirits
- Metal washing container with tight lid and strainer (also use for disposing of back home)
- Latex gloves to keep hands clean
- Wet Panel Carrier to transport your wet painting.
- Pochade box with easel that attaches to your tripod (if you have one)

Watercolour, Gouache or Ink

- Watercolour or Gouache paint box and/or selection of tubes and/or watercolour pencils
- 2-4 brushes and/or two sizes of water-brushes
- Pencils/eraser/sharpener/small ruler and/or Water-soluble ink pens and/or ink pens
- Viewfinder
- Watercolour block, pad or sketchbook or watercolour paper attached to foam core
- Paper towels and/or cloth for wiping brushes on
- Bottle of water
- Spritz bottle
- Two small Water Cups
- Sketch/Watercolour Easel (if you have one)

Pastel or Charcoal

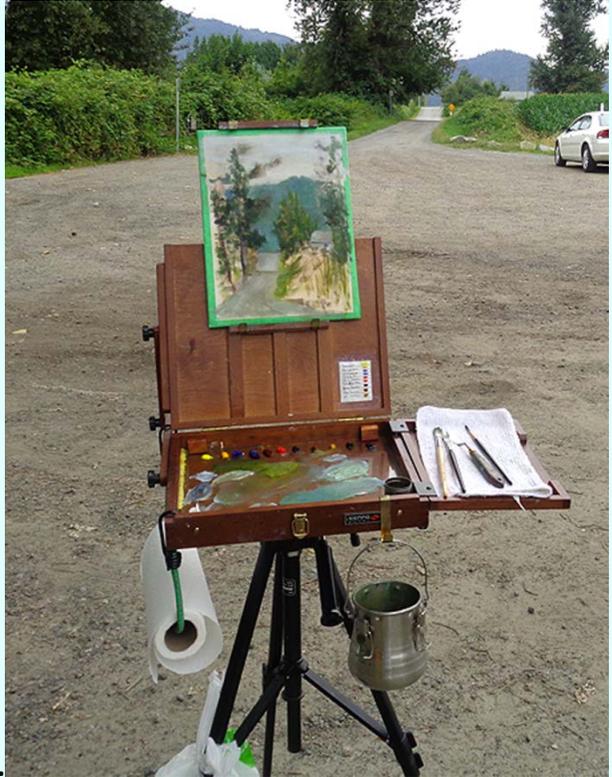
- A selection of pastels sticks, pastel pencils, charcoal, conté
- Pastel pad or pastel sketchbook and Clips to hold down the paper in the wind
OR Pastel Paper taped to a foam core board and a sheet of tracing paper & foam core board to cover your artwork and two folding clips to keep the boards together for transportation.
- Small Sketchbook, small ruler and a pencil or pen for sketching
- Viewfinder
- Fixative (if you use it)
- A box of baby wipes to clean your fingers and Gloves in a Bottle (or latex gloves if you use them)
- Stomps, tortillons, etc. as required by your personal style
- Water or Isopropyl Alcohol, an old brush & small container if you do underpaintings with your pastels.
- Towel or paper towels for wiping fingers and pastels while working.
- Pochade box for pastels with easel that attaches to your tripod (if you have one)

Plein Air Setups

Pochade Box with Stay Wet Palette setup for Acrylics



Pochade Box setup for Water-Mixable Oils



Pochade Box setup for Watercolour or Gouache



**Portable Painter watercolour/gouache box
(fits over your knee)**



Pochade Box setup for Soft Pastels



French Box Easel—my first easel for local acrylic plein air painting and through the Kootenays in 2014



Foldable Wagon

No more having to lug a backpack when trekking a bit farther outdoors.



Painting in the backyard



Painting in the interior of BC and beyond.



Painting with water mixable oils in Matsqui Regional Park



Painting with Soft Pastels in McDonald Park



Painting with Acrylics while traveling through the Kootenays.



Watercolour painting in Vancouver



2017
Using my over
the knee
Portable Painter
at
Spanish Banks.

Thumbnail 3 x 4

For Plein Air 9 x 12 or 11 x 14

Studio 18 x 24 and up

Thumbnail 3 x 3 3/4

For Plein Air 8 x 10

Studio 16 x 20 and up

Use to trace into your sketchbook for quick thumbnail notan and/or value sketches.

Thumbnail 3 x 6

For Plein Air 6 x 12

Studio 12 x 24 and up

Thumbnail 3 x 3

For Plein Air 6 x 6 or 8 x 8

Studio 12 x 12 and up