

Jean LeGassick demonstrated for students on the San Carlos Tree Farm and Ranch, in Colorado.

# Jean LeGassick:

## Simplified, Small, and Summarized

During a recent plein air workshop in Colorado, Jean LeGassick constantly emphasized the benefits of painting simple and beautiful shapes on small panels, and of only including details that summarized the total look and feel of the landscape. | **by M. Stephen Doherty**

Photos this article: Steve Bigley, Pueblo, Colorado



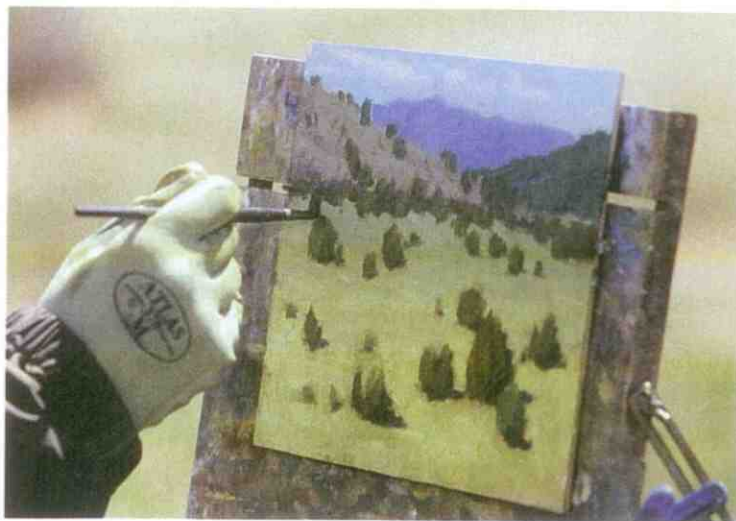
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# “Empty your mind of preconceived ideas and see a subject as it really is,” Jean LeGassick advised students

during a recent workshop in Pueblo, Colorado, organized by Art in the Aspens. “That’s hard to do at first, but when you can do it, the results are fabulous. Your colors and values will be truthful and beautiful. Your paintings will no longer be predictable, dull, or boring.”

When the Nevada artist met with her class during the first morning session of the workshop, LeGassick addressed some of the basics of outdoor equipment and procedures. “A lot of what I teach is how to streamline your equipment, making it easier to go out into the field, and to be able to set up quickly and efficiently,” she explained. “It’s hard enough to paint outdoors in the elements without also having to struggle with bad equipment. So I emphasize how to wind-proof easels using bungee cords, rocks, or anything else handy. That way you can concentrate on painting instead of fighting your equipment in adverse conditions.”

During the workshop, LeGassick put everyone at ease with her relaxed, humorous, enthusiastic attitude. She reviewed ways of addressing the challenges of limited time, moving subjects, changing light, and variable weather. “I did a few small demonstrations, but mostly I talked to the students, watched them paint, evaluated their level of experience,” LeGassick explained. “By the time we started the second day, I had a much better idea about the specific issues I could help them with individually throughout the workshop. For example, one student was having problems



#### OPPOSITE PAGE

To keep her easel from blowing over during her demonstration, LeGassick tied her backpack to the tripod.

#### RIGHT

Like many artists, LeGassick wears disposable plastic gloves to keep the oil colors from getting on her hands.

The instructor's demonstration painting and expanded easel.



**BELOW**

LeGassick finished her demonstration in the open field of the Colorado ranch.

**BOTTOM**

The workshop students moved to an area along a creek where the surrounding cliffs reduced the amount of wind blowing on them.



with composition, so for that person I emphasized the importance of doing several graphite 'thumbnails' (small sketches), then choosing the best design before she started each and every painting.

"When I did my first lengthy demonstration, I began by reviewing some of the basics of devising a composition and laying it out on a panel," LeGassick continued. "As I focused on a potential subject, I articulated for the students the questions I ask myself when I begin any painting so they would better understand my thought process. I wanted to be clear about what it was that excited me about the scene and enticed me to paint it. In other words, I wanted to identify the one main idea of the painting. This would help me decide, while painting, what elements in the scene would support that idea, and what elements to leave out as unessential."

LeGassick showed students how to use a viewfinder to compose their scenes, and then how to record those ideas





**ABOVE**

The instructor preferred to talk to students about methods for improving their paintings rather than actually working directly on the panels.

**OPPOSITE PAGE**

LeGassick offered advice to one of the workshop participants.

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Visit the Plein Air section of [www.myAmericanArtist.com](http://www.myAmericanArtist.com) to read about the history of the plein air movement.

Landscape With a Calm  
by Nicolas Poussin.





“With a small painting you are forced to go for the essentials because that’s all you have room for.”

with a quick drawing on the panel. “I started blocking in the painting with the three or four main values—the sky, the ground plane, and any uprights, such as trees or mountains—keeping the paint thin and averaging the color and value in each area,” she said. “Then I established the dark shapes, then the midvalues (without using white up to this point), and finally the light values. Once those shapes were formed, I added accents and highlights with the darkest dark and the lightest light, respectively. Then I used thicker mixtures of oil color to introduce warmer or cooler shifts with the value areas and provided final detailing—but only what was necessary.”

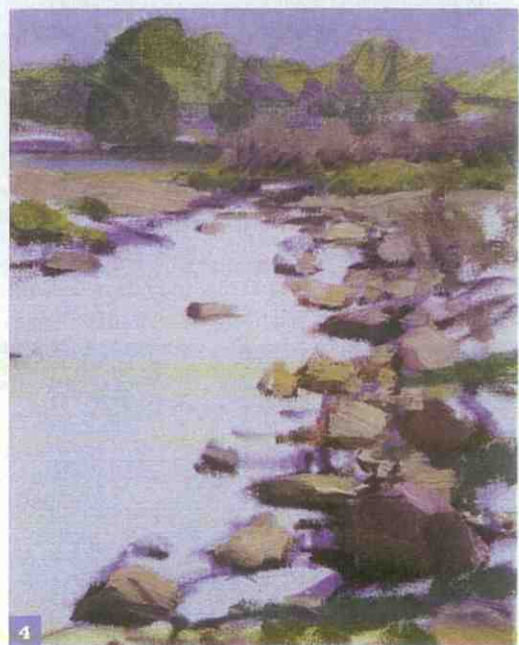
Because of the weather conditions in Colorado, which in this case included a couple of windy days, LeGassick advised students to paint on relatively small panels. “With a small painting, you are forced to go for the essentials because that’s all you have room for, and it’s a lot easier to deal with a small panel when you’re struggling with wind, extreme temperatures, excessive moisture, or any other condition that might become unpleasant over a one- or two-hour period,” the instructor explained. “I prefer to paint on small panels outdoors, and my favorite size is 8" x 10". I did a series of daily paintings for six months and made all of them 6"-x-8" panels, and I enjoyed working with that size as well. I could get enough information into that small format to help me if I decided to make it the subject of a larger studio painting.”

## LeGassick’s Plein Air Tips & Suggestions

- **Anticipate change.** Consider how the movement of the sunlight will change the scene, and paint the most changeable parts first.
- **Squint to eliminate details.** Only paint those simplified shapes.
- **Compare values and color temperatures.** The only way to accurately judge whether you have mixed the right combination of paints is to compare the mixture to what you observe or what is already on the painting.
- **Every time you see a plane change, look for a color and/or value change.**
- **Paint shapes, not things.**
- **Make all the shapes interesting.**
- **Simplify, simplify, simplify!** A painting is a visual poem, a distillation.
- **No mindless applications of paint.**
- **If something is wrong on your canvas, get rid of it by scraping the paint off, and then figure out how to repaint it correctly.**
- **If you think your picture needs something more, try taking something out before adding anything new.**



## Demonstration: Rocks Along the Arkansas



### Reference

#### Step 1

Looking through a viewfinder, LeGassick determined the composition for this demonstration.

#### Step 2

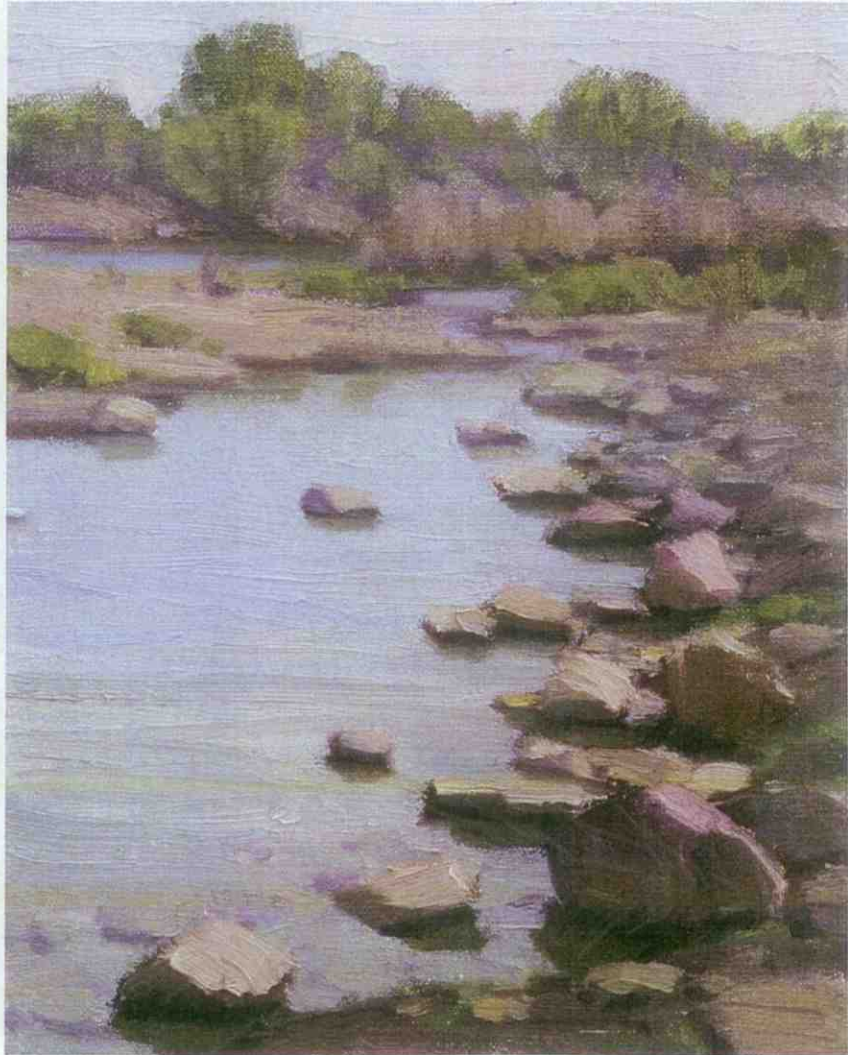
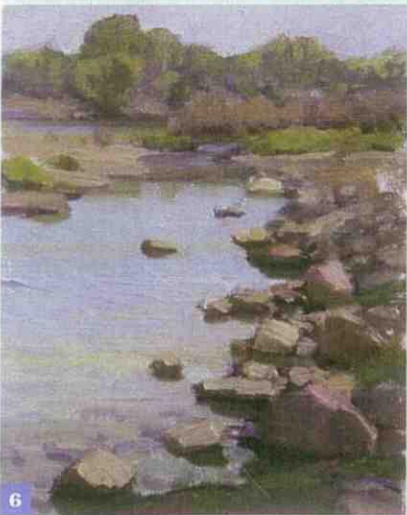
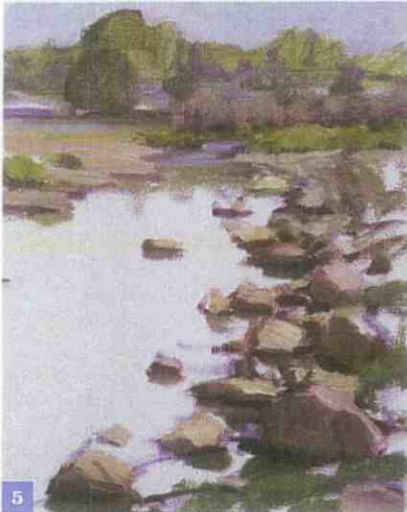
The instructor's palette of colors.

#### Step 3

LeGassick began by drawing the lines of the composition with a thin mixture of oil color.

#### Step 4

Working from the background to the foreground, the instructor blocked in the major shapes within the landscape scene.



### Step 5

LeGassick used the pattern of rocks along the creek to lead the viewer's eyes from the foreground to the background.

### Step 6

The instructor filled in the shape of the water and added details to the rocks.

THE COMPLETED PAINTING:

### Rocks Along the Arkansas

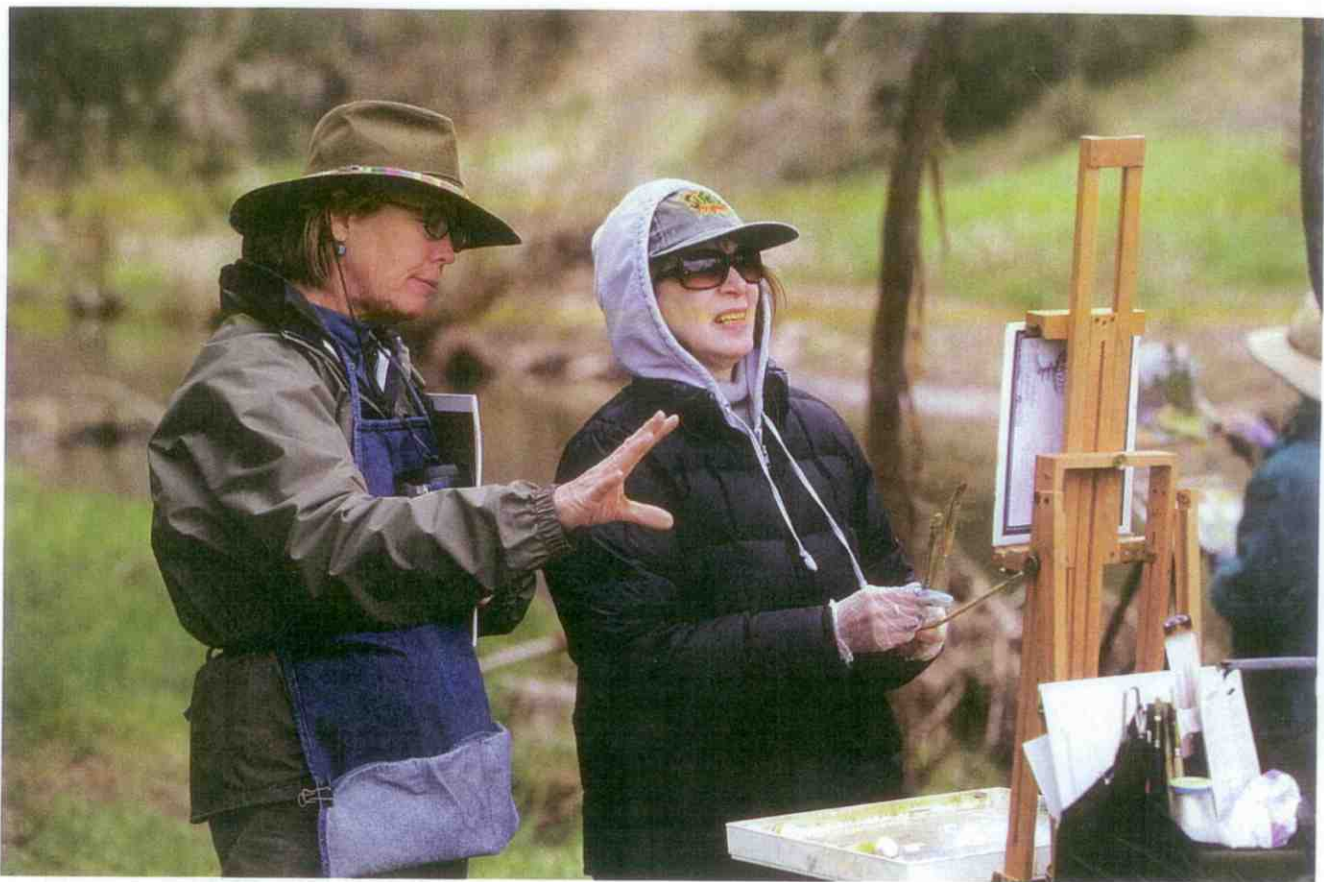
2008, oil, 10 x 8.  
Collection the artist.

**BELOW**

The instructor (wearing the blue apron) advised a student on how to improve her landscape painting.

**OPPOSITE PAGE**

LeGassick carried a canvas sketchpad with her so she could demonstrate techniques to the students.



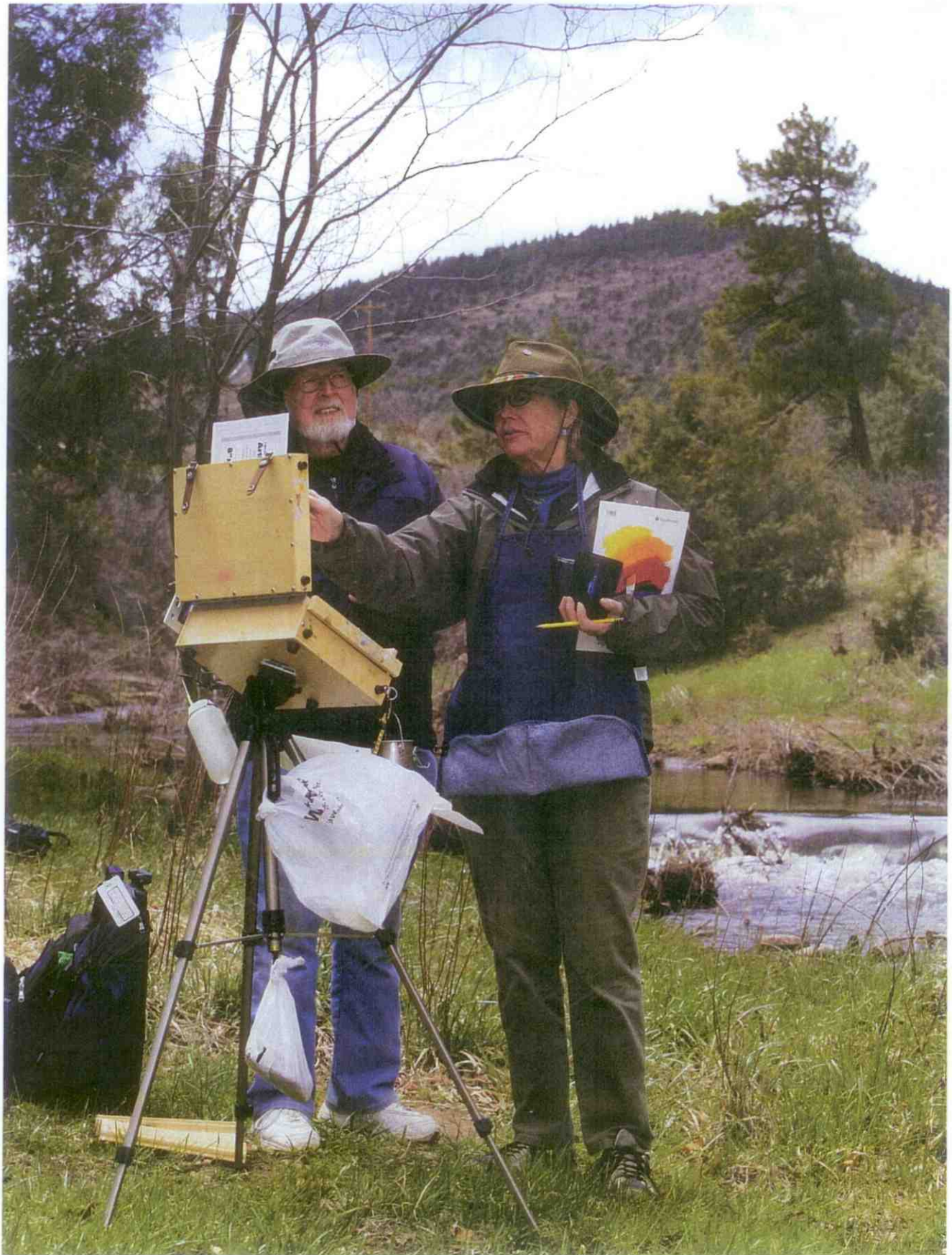
**“I think my best paintings are those that capture the atmosphere of the place and time, which requires strict observation.”**

After LeGassick completed her demonstration, the participants began working on their own landscape paintings, and the instructor offered individual guidance. “When I saw students running into trouble, or when they specifically asked me to help them with something, I first tried to verbalize the issues because my goal was for them to make the appropriate changes on their paintings,” she explained. “I also tried to show them what I recommended by painting or sketching in a small canvas sketchpad I carried with me during class. However, sometimes the only way to effectively show a student that his or her paint mixtures were too dark, too light, or the wrong color, was to pick up

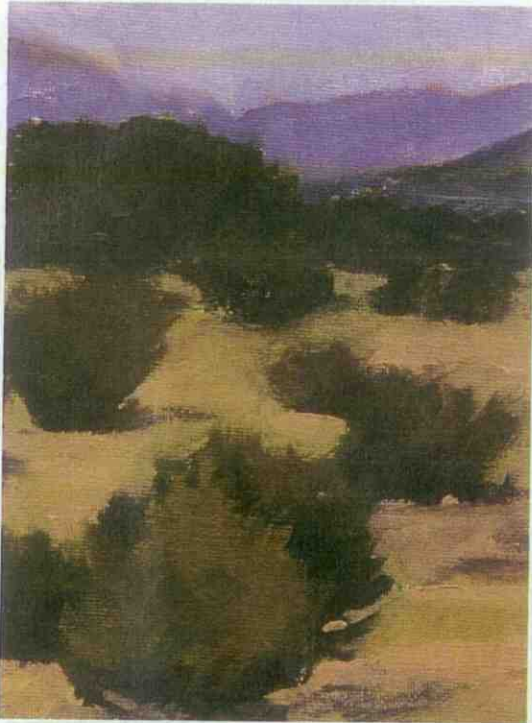
a brush, mix a more accurate combination of pigments, and—after asking permission—apply it directly to the student’s painting.”

LeGassick offered several more demonstrations during the workshop that were quick exercises aimed at addressing specific points, as well as more involved paintings. “I think my best paintings are those that capture the atmosphere of the place and time, which requires strict observation,” she revealed. “I tried to show the students in Colorado how I would look at a scene, eliminate unessential elements, and use a minimal number of brushstrokes to respond to the atmosphere and light at a particular place and time.”

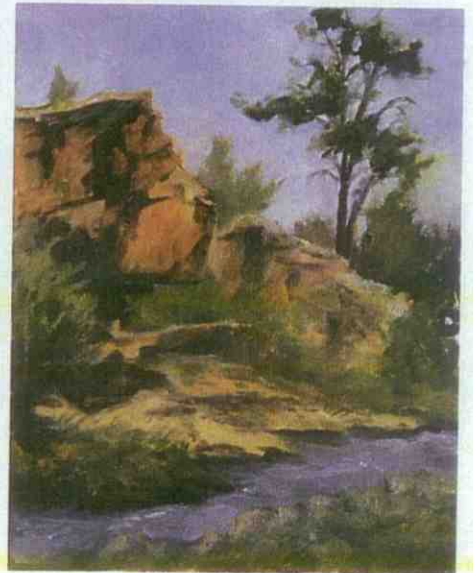
At the end of the workshop LeGassick offered a formal critique of all the students’ work and took some photos of their paintings. During that review, the instructor focused on the strengths of each piece while pointing out areas that could have been handled differently to make a more exciting and successful painting.



## Student Work



Paintings created by students who attended LeGassick's workshop in early May.



On the final day of the Colorado workshop, students laid out their paintings on the floor of a pavilion so LeGassick could offer critiques of their work.



LeGassick also encouraged the participants to take workshops with other professional artists who might help them expand their understanding of landscape painting. "I studied painting in college and worked from photographs for the first few years of my professional career, so I was totally humbled by plein air-landscape painting when I first started working outdoors near my home in Bishop, California in the late 1980s," LeGassick confessed. "I took a workshop with Jim Wilcox, and he set me straight on how to pack my gear, deal with the rain and wind, and simplify my palette. Then I got into a workshop with Michael Lynch, and his philosophy and approach to art really lit a fire in me. I left the workshop knowing I wanted to be a plein air painter the rest of my life. The best part of their teaching was that they showed me how to paint what interested me, not how to copy their subjects and style. That's what I hope each of my students will take from this experience." ■

*M. Stephen Doherty is the editor-in-chief of Workshop.*

## About the Artist

**Jean LeGassick** graduated with a B.F.A. from Art Center College of Design, in Pasadena, and became a signature member of the Plein-Air Painters of America in the mid-1990s. She taught painting at Cerro Coso Community College, in Bishop, California, for many years and now teaches workshops around the country. Her paintings have been included in numerous group and solo exhibitions, and she was one of six internationally known artists featured in a PBS television series titled "Plein Air: Painting the American Landscape." For more information on LeGassick, visit her website at [www.jeanlegassick.com](http://www.jeanlegassick.com).