

PLEIN AIR PAINTING: Where Did We Go Wrong?

by Jean Stern

THE EARLY 1980S SAW THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION of California art painted from the 1890s to about the early 1930s. This period has come to be called the “California Impressionist” or sometimes the “California Plein Air” style. The overwhelming popularity of these paintings in the last two decades has led to the founding of numerous significant private collections, an outpouring of articles, catalogues and books, as well as a growing interest of museums and art historians to research and document this style.

The 1980s also witnessed the growth of a significant group of young contemporary artists, heralded by members of the **California Art Club**, who readily turned to outdoor painting. These artists promptly adopted the label “plein air.” The term has a strong allusion to great art movements of the past, notably French Impressionism, and it has come to suggest elegance, superior talent and masterful facility with paint and brush.

Outwardly, the ascendancy of plein air painting has benefited all in the tripartite art community. The artists paint a substantial number of small, brilliantly coloured, relatively inexpensive outdoors scenes; the art dealers cover their walls with these delightful, easy-to-sell little jewels; and the collectors can build an imposing collection representative of the best artists of today for a lot less money than the cost of a single painting

by the greats of the past, be it **Edgar Payne** (1883–1947), **Granville Redmond** (1871–1935) or, most certainly, **Guy Rose** (1867–1925).

And yet, after two decades of indulging at the cornucopia of plein air, many artists are choosing to distance themselves from that designation. They consider it too limiting and more than a few have personally told me that they prefer to be known as “American Landscape Painters.”



Guy Rose (1867–1925)
Incoming Tide, c. 1917
Oil on canvas 24" × 29"
Private collection, courtesy of The Irvine Museum

WHAT IS PLEIN AIR?

The term “plein air” comes from the French phrase *en plein air* which is an idiom that does not translate directly, but simply means “outdoors.” Similarly, in Italian, the phrase is *al fresco*, and in Spanish it is *al aire libre*.

Plein air painting is a specialized approach that landscape painters have utilized for more than 150 years.

Plein air is not a philosophy, nor a style, and it is certainly not a static state that one reaches and remains in perpetual happiness. It is unquestionably a landscape painter’s most effective tool, and like any other tool, one needs to learn its proper uses, as well as its limitations. When followed to its completion, the plein air technique has proven over and over that it is the best approach to paint natural light.

The most important point of plein air painting is that it is not the end product; it is in fact, the beginning. It is how one starts the process of creating a



John Budicin
Study for San Gimignano, 2006
 Oil 7" × 10"

successful landscape painting. A plein air sketch by itself is but a fragment, a desire that has been abandoned and is forever out of reach.

It's tempting to continually paint small, appealing little jewels that tend to sell well, and unfortunately, many artists are unknowingly (or knowingly?) making a career of it. But one does so at his or her own peril. Inevitably, all three elements of the arts community will grow disillusioned: the artist ultimately gets labelled "a painter of minor works;" the dismayed collector realizes that his collection is full of nothing but small paintings; and the dealer will concede that the cost and effort expended to sell small paintings is the same as to sell large paintings, which command a higher profit margin.

Moreover, the practice of plein air has suffered abuse by being reduced to some sort of status symbol, a yardstick that says if you are not a plein air painter, you cannot be a good painter. Quite to the contrary, truly good landscape painters want to be judged by final works, paintings that are almost universally painted in the studio.

ORIGINS OF PLEIN AIR PAINTING

The custom of working outdoors has been practiced for several hundred years, but it was limited to drawing and watercolour painting, as oil paints were not suited for use outside the studio.

Produced in pot-sized batches, oil paints were necessarily restricted to the studio since the only way to prevent them from drying and hardening was to keep them warm, at a constant low simmer. Artists tried various methods to carry small amounts of prepared paint to the field to sketch outdoors, and various ways were used to carry fresh paint in portable, airtight and waterproof containers. A small bag made from a pig's bladder worked very well, but seldom for more than one-time usage. A pin hole was punctured on the side



John Budicin
San Gimignano, the View, 2007
 Oil 28" × 40"

of the pouch to release the paint, then, resealed with the pin, but without it being airtight the paint hardened after a few hours.

In 1841 **John Goffe Rand** (1801–1873), an American portrait artist living in England, patented the collapsible soft-metal paint tube, initially sealing the opening with cork stoppers, later, opting to use screw-on caps as we know it today. This light-weight, airtight container offered artists easy portability, and by collapsing part of the tube with each use, the remaining paint stayed fresh and pliable. The following year, the ten-year-old British manufacturer of art materials, **Winsor & Newton**, began marketing and selling Rand's paint tubes, thereby revolutionizing the art of painting.

The first painters credited with painting *en plein air* in a systematic manner were the artists of the **Barbizon School**. Originally a small group of Parisian artists of the 1830s, who associated around **Théodore Rousseau** (1812–1867), they broke with French tradition by rejecting the pre-set convention of the Academic manner that stressed carefully composed historical settings, including landscapes. In 1848 Rousseau led the group out of Paris to the Barbizon Forest, where they communed with nature and recorded their experiences by painting *en plein air*. In addition to Rousseau, the most notable Barbizon artists included **Camille Corot** (1796–1875), **Narcisse Diaz de la Peña** (1807–1876), and **Charles-François Daubigny** (1817–1878) who often gets the distinction of being the "first plein air painter."

In the early 1850s, a small group of anti-academic Italian artists began working together in Tuscany. They were called the **Macchiaioli** (Mah-keeah-YO'-lee), a term derived from the Italian word *macchia* meaning spots or patches of colour. The Macchiaioli painted outdoors along very similar approaches to the Barbizon painters in that both were intent on painting the landscape directly. The vivid Mediterranean light of Tuscany accounts why the Italian paintings are permeated with colour.

The Macchiaioli were habitually slighted by the crit-



Telemaco Signorini (1835–1901)
On the Hills to Settignano, 1885
 Oil on canvas 14 1/2" × 20"
 Private Collection



William R. Leigh (1866–1955)
Grand Canyon of Arizona, 1909
 Oil 20" × 16"
 Collection of Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art

brushstroke. Sadly, while the French Impressionists ultimately won respect and universal popularity, the Macchiaioli languished as an “also ran” for more than one-hundred years. Among the notable Macchiaioli painters were **Telemaco Signorini** (1835–1901), **Silvestro Lega** (1826–1895), and **Giovanni Fattori** (1825–1905).

Following upon the footsteps of the Barbizon and contemporaneous to the Macchiaioli, the Impressionists became the great popularisers of plein air painting. Impressionist landscapes were distinctive and often drew criticism and praise for their convincing effect of true natural light.

Perhaps like no other artist, the plein air painter is mesmerized by natural light. The passion for light drives them to seek the genuine experience and paint it, regardless of climate, weather or natural impediments. Hence, it is as a *plein air painter* that the *landscape*



Camille Corot (1796–1875)
Saulaie à Sainte Catherine, près d'Arras, 1855
 (*Mourners to Saint Catherine, near Arras*)
 Oil on canvas 13" × 18 1/2"
 Collection of Musée des Beaux Arts d'Arras

ics of their day, and even up to the mid-twentieth century they were generally neglected by art historians. On a path analogous to the Impressionists, the Macchiaioli embraced bold colour usage and an energetic

painter finds the ultimate reason for being, and at the same time, confronts his or her most rigorous challenge: to capture quickly the brilliant and fluid visual sensation of natural light at a specific time and place while facing the formidable constraint of fleeting natural light.

There are numerous tales of artists battling extreme situations to capture the correct light. On one of his first trips to the Grand Canyon, **William R. Leigh** (1866–1955) misjudged the oppressive heat when he went out to paint. He was forced to stop working when his paints melted from the heat and rolled down the canvas. By contrast, on a visit to Quebec in the middle of winter in 1908, **Alson S. Clark** (1876–1949) put on three layers of clothing to paint *en plein air* in Quebec Harbour, which he found impossible after his paints froze on his palette. While most any other artist would have packed-up and returned home, Clark, the resourceful and supreme plein air painter that he was, located a blacksmith to make a small iron box to hold a glowing piece of hot coal affixed to the underside of the palette. Unquestionably, Clark must have been freezing, but his paints stayed warm enough to allow him to continue working.

As the average person is not a plein air artist, it's often difficult to understand the respect accorded by artists for good natural light. Perhaps, what may seem to be an extreme example to a non-artist, the devoted plein air artist may relate to the anecdote when the distinguished painter of the Sierra Nevada, **Edgar Payne** (1883–1947), was set to marry artist **Elsie Palmer** (1884–1971) on the morning of November 9, 1912 he asked Elsie if she would contact all their guests and

reschedule the wedding for later that afternoon, because “the light was perfect.” Elsie understood the artistic opportunity of perfect light and readily complied.

Understandably, it is generally a trait of plein air painting organizations that their group’s total body of work is characterized by a disproportionately large number of small paintings and sketches, an inauspicious distinction that will forever haunt the legacy of the Macchiaioli.

Now is the time to restore our dedication to landscape painting, not only as artists, but as collectors, dealers and art historians. The sweet siren’s song of the plein air sketch as the painters’ panacea has to eventually be left behind. To paint the landscape is one of the most ancient of human endeavours. Landscape is surely the most supreme of art subjects.

Nature is always with us and indeed it is within us. It has long been imprinted on the human mind and is part of the human collective subconscious. Our affinity to nature is inescapable. The vision of a beautiful day makes us feel uplifted. A day in the country refreshes and restores us. When we can no longer deal with the modern world, with all its stresses and pollution, we turn to nature. A blue sky gives pleasure; green grass is calming, fresh air is rejuvenating. Nature is indeed our nurturing mother and we turn to her when we need respite.

Honour nature by properly portraying her majesty and grandeur. A small plein air sketch just will not do!

Notes: The author Jean Stern is Executive Director of The Irvine Museum.



Edgar Payne in his Paris studio working on his painting of *Mont Blanc*, based on his plein air study.
Photo Courtesy of The Irvine Museum



Alson Clark (1876–1949)
California Mountains
Oil 36" × 46"
Collection of The Irvine Museum



Alson Clark painting *en plein air* near Lone Pine, California.
Photo Courtesy of The Irvine Museum