

BU Tuscany Landscape Painting Program 2008 Capitignano, Italy

Nora Lehmann Miller

“He saw in nature the means for an arrangement of form and colour; he sought not so much the beauty of a part as the relation of parts to an organized whole.”

— Written of the artist John Henry Twachtman (1853 – 1902)

Preliminary Syllabus

This study-abroad program offers you the privilege of learning to paint *en plein air* in a place that is remarkably beautiful and close to some of the most extraordinary art in Western culture. You will also study Italian and art history with Mark Aeschliman, which will enhance and enliven your experience and understanding of the art and architecture we will visit on various field trips to surrounding sights. The landscape painting class can accommodate painters of various levels of experience, and will deal with a number of technical concerns specific to painting outdoors, while also encouraging the development of personally motivated projects.

My plan is to keep the curriculum flexible, so we can be responsive to trips we have taken and sights seen, any particular concerns or interests which may arise, and the individual needs of students.

Overview

Weeks 1 and 2: The physical challenges of painting outdoors; working with a limited palette to depict space and light

Painting *en plein air* is a kind of sport, in which the normal, considerable challenges of painting indoors are amplified by the physical difficulties of working outside at the mercy of the elements. If you have ever packed & prepared to go on a camping trip, then you will appreciate the level of forethought necessary to ensure that you will not only have everything you need to be physically comfortable, but that you will have a set-up adequate to your needs as a working painter. One needs a carefully planned portable studio in order to be able to focus on actually painting, and not various physical exigencies.

Painting outside can veer between bliss and extreme physical discomfort. The difference between having a transcendent experience or a terrible time depends largely upon the thoroughness of your preparation. When you are standing still in one position outdoors, a delightful sun quickly becomes scorching; dew-soaked grass wets your feet and chills you to the bone; bugs bite you and fly to their deaths in your painting in progress; you become ravenously hungry; there is nowhere to go to the bathroom; and potentially worst of all, passers by will try to *talk* to you whilst you are trying to *work*. We will take the challenge of creating an effective outdoor studio practice seriously – although it may

seem like mere logistics, it is the difference between being able to make a successful painting, or wasting a day in utter frustration. A successful portable studio will be highly personalized, and you will slowly work out what is most effective for you.

We will begin by making a number of smaller, faster paintings in *grisaille* to focus on value. Simplifying our process in the beginning will allow us to get used to painting outdoors, to focus on the effect of light on the landscape, and to practice getting a full range of values in a painting without the added complication of color.

One of the many challenges painting outdoors is that the light never stays the same. It may seem obvious that the sun is always moving overhead, but when you are used to the constant lighting of a studio set-up, it is shocking how fast the light can shift. We will make paintings at specific times of day, to address the different qualities of light and atmosphere at morning, afternoon, and evening.

Weeks 3 and 4: Color Mixing – making palettes both surprising and subtle; the problem with green; Composition and editing

From here, we will focus intensively on color mixing for the rest of the course. We will consider in depth the challenge of negotiating the intersection of value and color, and ways to organize the palette. Saturation, temperature and value as they relate to color will be (re)-explained. Complementary mixing will be emphasized, and specific, elegant, unexpected color will be our goal.

The problem with green in landscape painting is that there's usually too much of it – the grass, the leaves, the trees – you name it. We will investigate both tube greens, and various mixed greens, but perhaps more importantly, ways to avoid/substitute/sublimate/and/or otherwise complicate or eliminate the tyranny of green.

One of the great challenges of painting the landscape is that you no longer have something clearly demarcated as *subject*. You are IN the landscape, and are a part of everything. It is beneath and above you, before and behind you, to the left and to the right, and therefore, the task of the plein air painter is *editing*. Composition in the field becomes largely a process of omission. We will focus on compositional decision-making, and thinking our way around the rectangle.

Weeks 5 and 6: Location, location, location

At this point, if not before, I hope students will have found some aspect of or approach to the landscape that compels them, and we will make a series of longer and/or larger paintings based on personal interest. We will explore the importance of *where* one chooses to paint, avoiding the obvious, and trying to go beyond the beaten path.

Course Requirements

This class is for credit, and although it is a summer course, it is serious. You are expected to attend every class and participate fully. You will also be expected to paint at least 6 hours outside of class weekly. I hope, however, that you will find it truly enjoyable to synthesize what you are learning in painting class and what you are seeing in your trips to the surrounding cultural riches of Italy with your own experience out in the field. My goal is for each of you to paint as hard as you can, to become comfortable working outside, and to feel that you are beginning to articulate your own vision and approach to your painting, as you translate the abundance of visual information in the world around you to your canvases.

Class will meet twice a week, most likely on Mondays from 9am to 12:30 and Thursdays from 1:30pm to 5pm, but may vary depending on the schedule of field trips, and any special circumstances we may need to take into account.

Grading

Grading will take into account both your in-class work and your independent work, in addition to your effort, attitude, participation and development. A good grade will reflect a clear understanding of the concepts, a real investment of time and effort, and a high level of execution. An A grade will indicate *exceptional* work. However, this summer, somewhat removed from the ordinary academic framework, I hope you'll be awake and engaged with the process, willing to try new things, and even to "fail" at first. Openness to the unknown and the possibly uncomfortable really will take you farther than anxiety about achieving immediate results.

My contact info

I am more than happy to answer any questions about this class, or discuss the program in general with any interested students. Please email me at nora_lehmann@hotmail.com and we can set up a time to talk. *Ci vediamo in Italia!*