

# A Systematic Approach to Acrylic Landscapes

BY MARCIA BURTT

*I've been painting acrylic landscapes en plein air for nearly fifteen years. And with my simple time- and paint-saving system, I've been able to use this fast-drying medium outdoors with great success.*

**E**ven in the 1950s, when I was a high school student taking my first summer painting course, I resisted working in oils. I felt more comfortable with watercolor and pastel, so I thinned the oils as much as I could to make them dry faster. By the time I started graduate school, acrylics had arrived on the scene, and I took to them like a duck to water. They dried fast and thin, enabling me to continually rework areas without losing the paint's freshness. If my first thin wash worked, I could leave it alone, enjoy its brilliance, and have it almost pass for a watercolor. If I wanted to rework or adjust shapes—a more common occurrence—I could immediately paint over the dry layer and treat it as an underpainting.

I've now been an acrylic landscape painter for nearly fifteen years and am still crazy about the medium. In order to adapt to the requirements of painting on location, I've devised a simple paint- and time-saving system for successfully working outdoors in acrylics.

*Evening From  
the Ridge, 1993,  
acrylic, 20 x 20.  
Collection  
Rosemary and  
Bernard Parent.*

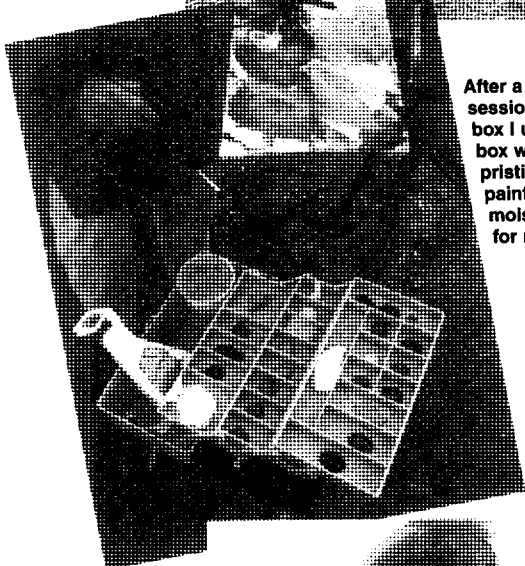


Friends and I gather to paint at a local "endangered landscape."



My trusty French half-easel sets up in a flash.

After a few painting sessions, the tackle box I use as a paint box won't look so pristine, but the paints will remain moist and usable for months.



The initial lay-in. I establish the large shapes as well as the rough value and color relationships without bothering with a preliminary drawing. At this point I step back and see if the composition satisfies me before going ahead.



The completed painting: *Spring Light at the Wilcox Property*, 1995, acrylic, 24 x 20. Collection the artist.



I complete the painting by gradually adjusting shapes and refining. I arrange the easel so I can look back and forth from the scene to my painting with minimal effort.



*Autumn in the Vineyard*, 1993, acrylic, 25 x 30. Collection Joan and Matt Challacombe.

### MATERIALS

There are five elements I focus on in respect to materials: the paint box, spray bottle, easel, palette, and substrate. My paint box is a three-tier fishing-tackle box with molded dividers to hold my colors (I use one compartment for each color). The molded dividers are important because paint can leak from one compartment to another if the dividers are the slip-in kind. I squeeze enough color into each compartment to last three or four painting sessions, and I arrange the colors as I would on a conventional palette. On the top tier I place my greens, blues, and purples; yellows, reds, and Acra violet are on the next tier; and earth tones, black, and white comprise the bottom. This set-

up can last for months, and I can add new colors as needed.

For many artists, using a spray bottle is not news, but it is essential when painting with acrylics outdoors. If possible, to keep out of the sun, I try to locate myself under a tree, or on windless days I sometimes use an umbrella attached to my easel with a C-clamp. When I'm in the sun, especially on dry or windy days, I find it necessary to lightly but repeatedly mist my paints. When working indoors for any length of time, I add a few drops of vinegar to the spray water to kill mold spores. (The ultraviolet light of the sun takes care of this when painting en plein air.)

Another prerequisite for plein air

painting is a good easel. I use a half-size French easel, the kind available through retail stores and mail-order art suppliers. After many years, I have found that cheaply made easels have joints and hinges that can't withstand the wear and tear of frequent use. I expect my easel to set up fast, function smoothly, and take years of stress (I paint in heat, wind, fog, and, on occasion, light rain). Only the well-made ones seem suitably durable. Also, I substitute padded, adjustable shoulder straps—made for backpacks and available at mountaineering stores—for the skinny leather straps supplied with the easel.

The image of an artist wielding a wooden palette in the great outdoors is a romantic one, but such setups



are not very practical. Since it's not possible to remove dried-on layers of acrylic paint from the beautiful folding wooden palette that comes with French easels, I gave mine to an oil-painting buddy. I make throw-away palettes for myself out of two pieces of foam board, which I hinge together using wide masking tape. These palettes are lightweight and cheap and can be used for months until paint buildup renders them too heavy to hold.

My favorite substrate is canvas, especially a nice, smooth, white one that will show brilliantly through a thin wash. When I'm traveling and space is a consideration, however, I often paint on double-ply museum board that I've gessoed and sanded twice. When I embark on a trip involving many stops or a lot of hiking, I'll take only a block of watercolor paper plus my paint box (already filled to capacity), an extra tube of white, my brushes, and the French easel (and, of course, a plastic water container). In addition, I'll take my oldest T-shirts to wear, which become the next day's rags when they're ready for the wash. When my heart is set on taking canvases, I use sizes that can fit within each other (30" x 30", 24" x 24", 18" x 18", and 12" x 12", for example); it's a great space-saving trick. Or if I'm hesitant to take only squares, I try to get canvases that share a dimension (18" x 18", 18" x 24", 18" x 30", 18" x 36", for instance) so they are easy to bind together with a strap.

#### TECHNIQUES

Everyone paints differently, but acrylic lends itself to artists who work spontaneously but have a tendency to reassess and repaint. In my work, I begin by using a large brush—No. 18 or bigger—to create large areas of color; doing so enables me to immediately determine whether or not the composition is workable, and it roughly sets the values. At this stage I often work transparently; and since I begin with a white, primed canvas or museum board, the transparent paint can produce vibrant, clear effects usually obtainable only with watercolor.

Continuing to use the large brush, I gradually refine values and shapes, making sure my focal point is where

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Left: *Blue Moon*, 1993, acrylic, 16 x 12. Collection Jennifer and Daniel Smith.

Opposite page: *Spring Storm*, *Wildflower Meadow*, 1991, acrylic, 24 x 18. Collection David Sowle.

#### GETTING YOUR PAINTINGS INTO PRINT

I was lucky enough to have a publisher approach me at an outdoor art show about creating posters from some of my paintings. Before making a decision, I went down to our best local poster shop and looked carefully through the catalogs supplied by poster dealers. Satisfied with the quality of the art posters I saw, I decided to do it.

Building and maintaining a relationship with a publisher, working together to select images, and painstakingly reading and discussing the contract (and making changes to it if necessary) are all part of generating a successful poster print. Self-publishing is a difficult and tricky business. No one wants to get stuck with fifteen thousand posters and no way to sell them. If you really want to self-publish, here are a few suggestions. First, know where you want to sell your prints. If you plan to sell them through local shops, show them your images first and have them help you decide which one will make the most salable print.

Second, consider selling a limited rather than an open, or poster, edition. Although opting to produce a limited edition means you'll have to keep track of every print and number and sign each one, it also means the value of each print will be greater and you'll have a vastly reduced inventory to store. If you're a printmaker, you already have very limited editions available; selling locally is perfect for you. If you're a painter, you have to decide on the best way to reproduce your work.

There are tradeoffs in quality, cost per print, and start-up costs that you'll need to research. For beginners, I'd suggest consulting your local print house if you're considering a commercial lithographic print (these have become common when only a few hundred are to be printed and no open edition exists). Recently, it has become possible to make high-quality prints on 100%-rag paper with a relatively small start-up cost by means of digital computer separations. This kind of print is called an IRIS print, or a Giclé print. The color separation of your image is stored on a disk and can be printed one or several at a time. This way there is no large inventory or big investment. The cost per print, however, is much higher than if done by commercial lithography.

Another possible approach, if you decide to try Giclé prints, is to give slide sheets of your images to your favorite retail outlets, along with a small sample print and, of course, a price list for the various sizes. And don't forget to double your prices so your retailer can make his or her share!

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surface for *Fireweed Along Blue Moon Road* in this manner.

Randolph believes that ultimately the most important advice for beginning artists, or for any artist, is to paint what they love. "They should try to figure out what they really want to say in a work," she says. "If they don't know why they're painting a particular scene, they should select another. Paint what is important to you—what you know best—or ask yourself if there is a particular place that is beckoning you to paint it; otherwise, your work will have no meaning."

Randolph finds pastel to be a convenient medium. "I leave my pastel sticks out in my studio, ready for me to use when a block of time suddenly becomes open," she says. "I used to work when my children took a nap, but sometimes I'd awaken early in the morning before other family members did, when the house was quiet. I'd pick up my La Carte paper, tape it to my drawing board, and jump right into it. Even if I worked only a half an hour each day, I'd have a finished pastel the following week. I don't have to paint only when a large block of time is available. My youngest child recently began school, so I now have more time to paint, and the landscape is calling me outdoors once again to work on location."

Randolph sometimes works from photos that she or her husband take, using them primarily for reference. "When I paint from a photo, I playfully exaggerate the color and textures of the scene, working from my memory," she explains. "Whatever method I use, my pastels become a personal expression of my relationship with the natural world." ■

*Karen Frankel is an award-winning writer-producer of corporate videos and a corporate speech writer. She lives in New York City.*

## BURTT

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I want it. It's hard to resist going straight to the details, but I have found that nothing ruins a work faster than getting out a small brush too early! Very few artists have the skill to keep all the values, shapes, and colors correct while working solely with a small brush. In fact, when I do see my painting going awry, I usually go back to using a big brush and ruthlessly repaint.

Because acrylics have traditionally tended to dry toward the middle tones—that is, the lights dry darker than they look when wet and the darks dry lighter—I've developed the habit of slightly exaggerating value relationships when I paint. I do the same for color: I try to emphasize the colors I actually see and not to use color arbitrarily.

My palette consists mostly of cadmium and quinacridone colors, although I couldn't paint landscapes without Winsor & Newton's true Hooker's green. Other essential colors on my palette include Winsor & Newton's permanent rose and quinacridone red; Liquitex's Thalo blue and Acra violet; Golden's turquoise, violet oxide, and white; plus any reputable brand of phthalocyanine green, permanent green light,

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chrome oxide green, ultramarine blue, cobalt blue, dioxazine purple, cadmium yellow light and medium, cadmium orange, cadmium red light and medium, raw sienna, and black.

Some artists enjoy using only a few colors to mix almost everything. I believe, however, that there are colors that can't be created through mixing. For example, there is no way to mix quinacridone violet using the cadmium colors and cobalt blue; I know this because I spent fifteen years painting with only cadmium red medium, cadmium yellow medium, cobalt blue, black, and white. Using a limited palette is a wonderful exercise and develops your skill at seeing values, but at the same time it trains you to see colors poorly. Now I treat myself to a full range of luscious reds, magentas, and violets.

My focus has been on technical matters because I find many painters shoot themselves in the foot when it comes to their setup. They might start with too few colors, arrange their easel so they have to turn around every time they refer to the subject, let their paints dry up in the sun, or use dirty water when trying to mix the clean, clear blue of a midday sky. But the whole point of an effortless, well-functioning setup is to enable the artist to pay complete attention to the subject and allow for full expression. For this reason, I find the cleanliness and instant revisability of acrylics perfect for plein air painting. ■

*Marcia Burt completed a double major in psychology and art at the University of California, Berkeley, and received an M.A. degree in art from the University of Montana in Missoula. She was artist in residence at Yosemite National Park in 1992 and a winner in the first annual Winsor & Newton Competition in 1993. She is a founding member of the OAK group, which creates and sells artwork depicting endangered lands to help raise money for and public awareness of these precious spaces in Santa Barbara, California (see "Painters as Preservationists," by Thomas Bolt, American Artist, October 1988). Since 1986, the group has raised more than \$100,000 by means of a semiannual art exhibition. Burt is also a member of The Plein Air Painters of America and The California Art Club.*

## JOHNSON

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attention directed inward."

Despite the fact that these paintings portray people as mysterious and anonymous, they have often prompted viewers to commission portraits from Johnson. "I can achieve a likeness of someone without any real struggle, so the challenge is to put together images and information in a way that will make the painting become something more significant than a record of one person's appearance," he comments. "In a couple of situations, I worked from a frozen video image and some snapshots of the subject."

Johnson deliberately avoids subjects that are sweet or idealistic. "I did those kinds of pictures when I first started painting, but I found they broke down through