

# Plein Air Painting -

"Plein air" means "out-of-doors" in French. Plein Air Painting, which can be historically traced to an engraving from about 1630 depicting a painter at work in the open air, was in full bloom by 1800 in and around Rome. In England, Constable was working outside completing paintings by about 1815. In 1842, Winsor Newton introduced the collapsible painting tube which made it much easier for painters to leave the studio for the great outdoors.

Generally, plein air paintings are completed out-of-doors. Originally, these "sketches" were not meant to be finished works, but were used by the artist as aids in producing larger, more finished works back in the studio. Today the term "plein air" generally means a painting completed outside or completed mostly out-of-doors and finished in the studio.

The roots of painting from life are found in 19th-century Europe and quickly spread to 20th-century America. Englishman John Constable believed the artist should forget about formulas and trust his own vision in finding truth in nature. To find that truth, he made sketches outdoors, then elaborated on them in the studio.

Around the same time in France, in a small village outside Paris called Barbizon, a group of artists drew inspiration from peasant life and the natural world surrounding it. Like Constable, Francois Millet and Gustave Courbet challenged conventions of the day, choosing everyday subjects and presenting them in natural settings, basing their paintings on the sketches made in the field.



Eureka Springs artist, Jae Avenosa, created this plein air painting, *Monteriggiano*, while studying in Italy. Although some people associate it with Impressionism, plein air painting does not conform to any single style, subject, approach, or philosophy.

The 'realists', as they came to be called, were followed by the mid-19th century revolution in France, led by 'impressionists' Edouard Manet, Claude Monet, Edouard Degas, Auguste Renoir, and others. They believed that you should trust your eyes, maintaining that what you saw in nature was not form, but rather light on form - light that could be conveyed by color. Taking their paint tubes and easels outdoors, they re-created the world as colors which suggested light. Rebuffed for what appeared to be unfinished paintings, the impressionist vision later became a standard for truthfully conveying the outdoor experience.

What began with the first painters in Rome, the Barbizon painters in the forest of Fontainebleau, and the French Impressionists, continued with the American Impressionists. Places with remarkable light were of particular interest to painters. On both the East and West Coasts, and in the American Southwest, painting colonies formed where the goal of teachers and students was to capture the light and colors unique to the place.

## Painting from Life

By Jody Stephenson

*The experience of painting outdoors, en plein air, is the true test of your abilities as a painter. There are so many challenges: deciding on the subject; setting up equipment; working quickly to capture the light before it changes; dealing with the weather, the wind,*

# Luminous Landscapes

*the bugs, the tourists. There is no recliner in the corner, no climate control, no time to think, no indoor plumbing, nothing but you and nature. Once you get started, however, it's truly a religious experience. There is nothing like it. You are not working from secondhand source material; i.e., the camera hasn't interpreted the subject for you. You begin to feel at one with the landscape, experiencing multiple levels of reality, like you are actually inside the painting you are working on. It's like putting on a pair of rose-colored glasses and achieving a truly heightened sense of awareness. But alas, the elation ends there.*



Jody Stephenson, worked 'en plein air' at Beaver Bridge, to create the painting detailed on the cover of this issue.

*Then, the humbling experience begins. It's just you and your little canvas with your paints and brushes, trying to capture the infinite variety of colors, the nuances of light, the layers of atmosphere, the patterns of the trees, the rolling clouds, the glowing blades of grass, the shimmering of sun on the water, the ever-changing shadows, the grand design of it all—the awesome creativity of God. Whew! Who is up to such a challenge?*

*Each time you go out on location, you swear you'll never go back. It's just too disappointing. The painting never adequately captures the beauty of the actual scene. It only stands as a dim reminder-like a postcard from a vacation. But it creates for the artist a scrapbook of experiences. Each time you view the painting, you are transported back to the place. You remember every detail, even how the breeze felt on your face. So you go back out and paint again and again, hoping for that magic. Each painting has a special memory of a moment frozen in time—a place truly experienced, interpreted, and understood.*

## Paul O'Neill

Paul O'Neill, a graduate of Paier College of Art, has spent his entire life as a working artist and a student of many accomplished contemporary painters. In 1995, he retired as a graphic artist after a twenty-year career with a Fortune-500 company and began to dedicate himself to the fine art of painting.

O'Neill's work with oils and acrylics is noticeably influenced by the American plein air Impressionists who developed a style that evolved from French Impressionism but placed more emphasis on recognizable subjects. Their work on location depicted the changing effects of light with masses of color while modeling and defining the forms with distinct color variations. Their primary goal was to capture the light and colors unique to particular locales. Residing in New England, Florida, and recently, in Arkansas, has provided O'Neill with three distinct geographical locations to work within.



*Lily Pond* by Paul O'Neil, Kings River Fine Art  
[www.kingsriverfinearts.com](http://www.kingsriverfinearts.com)

Open-air artists like O'Neill attempt to capture an immediate impression of what the eye sees, rather than what the viewer knows or feels about the work. They study how light appears on subjects in different weather and at different times of the day; an interest that can be traced back to Realism. While much of O'Neill's work tends to be highly impressionistic, he is in fact, an accomplished realist painter. In his still life, residence and marine painting, his keen exactitude in draftsmanship and perspective is clearly shown.

© 2008 Studio 8 Creations - Eureka Springs Artists & Galleries Collectors Guide 2008  
[www.collectorsguideeurekasprings.com](http://www.collectorsguideeurekasprings.com)