

# Painting Plein Air and Traveling

*By Alfred Currier*

Plein air painting is more about organization than the actual painting process and I think most serious plein air painters will attest to this. Having said that, I've noticed that a large percentage of outdoor painters have so much gear with them that straying far from the car would be a logistical problem. This article will address the organization for extended traveling with your equipment.

Each year, I spend a month traveling and plein air painting to break up my routine and to gain a fresh look at my approach to art. One month allows me to experience the local culture and feel their lives which then transcends into my work in the form of emotion. Rarely do I travel and photograph with the idea of painting from photos once I get home. I'm set up for it in my studio but it feels too much like manufacturing to me. Other artists are quite fine with this process, but I need the creative challenge to art whether in the studio or the great outdoors.

I'm somewhat a destination traveler that needs a base camp, generally a motel of some sort. I have also done home exchanges which work out well financially. In either case, my packing list includes an easel, canvas, a month's worth of painting supplies, ten pair of socks, underwear, a couple of shirts, one pair of shorts, one pair of pants, and a minimal amount of toiletries. As you can tell, I bring little in the way of clothing but, will buy as I need it. That's the fun part of packing light.

I have owned almost every kind of painting easel known to mankind. If I'm painting locally, I generally use a French easel. I've had my old 386 Julian for years. It feels like an old shoe that I just can't part with. However, when I travel via air to some distant land, I will take one of three "pochade" boxes. I only carry the palette/painting part and not the carrying box that comes with it. Mostly, I use 9" x12" panels. You can adjust for whatever size you prefer but, 9" x 12" good size for me since it's a standard dimension for ready made frames. My goal for a day of painting is to carry everything in a small day backpack that allows me to walk around without a lot of weight.

Using 9x12 Ray Mar 1/8" canvas panels or gessoed birch plywood panels, I can pack them easily in my suitcase. Ray Mar also has wet panel carriers that you

can transport 2 per slot, back to back. Experience says that 10 days equals 6 panels. The most I have ever painted on a single trip was 30 in a month. Transporting 30 wet paintings requires an entirely different approach to organizing. In that case, I bought a roll of preprimed canvas and cut it into 12" rolls in my chop saw. I then unrolled what I needed each day, cut it off, and taped the canvas to a board for painting. With that kind of extended trip, I rolled the 30 semi wet paintings up in a roll divided by wax paper. When I arrived home, I unrolled the paintings and mounted them to a birch panel with Gorilla Glue. Some touch-up was needed but surprisingly not as much as you would think.

A lesson in terminology regarding oil paint and solvent will ease the anxiety of airline travel. First, let me state the guidelines for modern post 9/11 travel. "Flash point" of volatile materials is the key to getting your supplies on an airline. Flash point by definition is the point when material catches on fire thus causing combustion. The allowable flash point of solvents for packing in your suitcase is 140 degrees and nothing under. Gamblin Artists Colors states their Gamsol (mineral spirits) has a flash point of 145 degrees. Warning: I don't care how right you feel you are, don't try to pack a gallon of that in your suitcase. It won't fly, so to speak. As far as oil paint, get used to calling them "artist's colors". The word "oil" freaks the TSA (airport security) out. The flashpoint for oil paints, I mean artist's colors, hovers around 450 degrees which is well above the 140 degrees allowable. However, remove all inflammatory words from your vocabulary if you want these paints to fly. After deciding which pigments I will bring, I go to the paint manufacturer's web site and copy their flash point data for each pigment I intend to bring. I then place this specification data in an envelope and write on the outside: **Enclosed please find the Flash Point for each of these artists' colors. TSA defines flammable liquids as 140 degrees and below. All of these colors are above 400 degrees.** Next, after packing my suitcase, I lay this packet right on top before closing the suitcase. This will be the first thing they see when they inspect your bag. As a matter of point, a suitcase with a month's worth of art supplies viewed through x-ray looks very suspicious and I'm pleased they check it out. Buy your spirits after you land in your host country. Before leaving the United States, make sure you research the word for turpentine or mineral spirits in the country you are visiting. Generally speaking, it's not a common word so finding the translated version can be a chore if you're not prepared. One artist ended up with paint remover instead of mineral spirits in France because of bad translation. I personally washed all of my underwear with fabric softener in Italy on one trip, odd feeling.

*Now, back to the backpack for packing and carrying on your back.* Inside, there should be enough supplies to complete a day's mission of one painting in completion, two if energized, and three if you're much younger than I. My backpack contains the Pochade easel, paints, mineral spirits storage container, brushes, palette knife, "Leatherman's" tool (or equivalent), small artist umbrella, light weight strong tripod, plastic trash bags, paper towels, and anything else that would be small and lightweight. Your panel or canvas can be carried.

With your brimmed hat on, comfortable old shoes, and a lightweight jacket for the elements, you're ready to walk and paint for hours. As a matter of point, never wear bright colored shirts or jackets while painting. They will impair your ability to judge color and value because of the reflection into your painting. Wearing dark colors works best.

For completed paintings, don't sign them 'til you get them home. Some countries will charge you for signed paintings even if you are the artist. This happened to a Whidbey Island sculptress who finished a nice sized Carrara marble piece in Italy and signed it. The art was inspected and taxed during the shipping process. It's my suggestion that you be very careful in foreign countries in regards to selling your art. Although never arrested, I was tested. Each country has its distinctive set of regulations and you have to remember that you are a guest. I guess I must have looked like a street vendor on San Marcos Square, Venice about ten years ago when I was asked to produce a license. Again in Victoria, British Columbia, 2009, a woman handed me a loonie, then asked to see my permit for begging. This is true in the United States as well. A well known New Mexico plein air painter was either arrested or almost arrested during the Laguna Beach Plein Air Invitational a few years ago. It was said that he was trying to sell paintings to a passersby without a California license. Now, I have sold works to passersby but, I never ask for money. I refer to my website and ask for their contact information. Since I live in Washington State, it's perfectly legal for me to sell art in this state although some cities have their own permits that govern.

Up to this point, my emphasis has been on destination travel where you would rent a place and stay a couple of weeks or a month. Let's say you want to travel from town to town around Europe. In this case, I would recommend a rental car for your base of operation, meaning that all of your painting supplies remain in the car. You still should consider your day pack and park the car in a safe spot. This gives freedom to explore the nooks and crannies of your new environment. When using a rental car, I will cover the back seat and/or trunk with something

to protect the upholstery. As you can imagine, rental car companies take a dim view of cars returned with oil paint smeared all over them. You might consider packing an old thin blanket for this use and throw it away at the end of the trip. This gives room in your luggage for the things you may purchase while on your journey like new clothes you might need along the way since you packed sparsely.

As I mentioned in the first paragraph, organization is probably the most important part of painting on location. The actual painting on location, although important, is a small part of the process. Sunny days vs cloud cover days offers different opportunities and problems. I love painting under direct sun. I like the contrasts and comparisons of color and value. Painting on sun-filled days means that you have to be fast and deliberate so experience definitely comes into play. A fast loose approach leans more on the side of acquired technique. Cloudy days are great for tonalists and sensitive paintings. The benefit to this type of painting is that you don't have to chase the sun and shadows, your light is constant, and you have more time to paint.

When painting plein air, I try to stay with small canvases like 9x12 or 12x12. This helps me with the speed aspect. Larger paintings can be done most effectively on location if you're a master of washes, see Richard Schmid. When on 1-5 day painting trips, I will use 1/8" gessoed birch panels, stretched canvases, or regular hardboard because weight and volume of work is not an issue like it would be when traveling for extended lengths of time. These sizes and what I'm suggesting are only guidelines based on my experience in traveling and painting.

To speed up drying while on the road, I use alkyd white paint. Alkyd white and everything that is mixed with the white will be dry within a few days making it easier to transport. Some would say use all alkyd paints but that does limit your choices of paint manufacturers if you have favorite colors. There are a variety of boxes available for carrying wet paintings and I do use them. Again, I'm referring to extended travel. These are bulky and carry little by comparison to rolling canvases up and placing in a tube.

Briefly, I'm going to talk about the process of painting so you'll get a feel of my approach. Whether starting my painting with mass or line, I will always tone my canvas with a thin transparent dark. 90% of the time, it is transparent red oxide. I do this so that while in the heat of a painting, I do not feel the need to cover all of the white unpainted areas thus speeding up my process.

Some motifs will demand a high degree of accuracy such as a city scene with lots of buildings and perspective issues. Here, I will start the painting with line. Other works can be achieved by scrubbing in your darks in mass. I like the later approach as it seems to leave a looser painting in the end. There's no right or wrong. It's just an approach. I am not a vignette type painter so I do paint edge to edge and toning my canvas helps. What I found was that if I kept my darks thin and transparent when I applied them initially, most everything else that went on top had alkyd white mixed in it thus drying at a much faster rate. This also means that the thin darks that may be a little wet would actually be below the level of the thicker and dryer lights on top thus less likely to smear. This, furthermore, keeps those thin transparent darks rich with color. So, paint dark to light keeping your darks thin and transparent and your lights thick and juicy with an alkyd white. When I paint, I mix, apply, wipe my brush, mix apply, and wipe my brush. This is a deliberate approach to painting. In the beginning, I try not to back stroke my brush while painting which can contribute to muddy paintings. After the painting is blocked in, I'll go back to soften or establish edges, subtract details, and add details.

While painting, squint to judge value and open your eyes to see color. Paint shapes not things. The reason for this is that as soon as you identify an image in your mind, you will start entering your preconceived ideas of what this subject is thus losing its reality. This isn't to say that you must always paint just what you see but at least know when you're going to be creative and deviate from the subject at hand.

Painting on location can be overwhelming for a new artist. In the beginning, you might consider a view-finder to simplify and identify your parameters. As a natural occurrence, most of us will want to select every neat thing we see on the horizon. The view-finder shows us that we can't. As you gain experience, you will find that it won't be needed as much. Using a camera to gain further reference of the subject you're painting is a common practice. Be careful and don't let it be a crutch. On the other hand, if you'd say that you only paint from life and never use a camera, you have limited yourself with respect to your art. As a final note, always carry a sketch book.



Listed below are some of the equipment and supplies I use.

Gamblin Artists Colors	<a href="http://www.gamblincolors.com">www.gamblincolors.com</a>
Gamblin Gamsol mineral spirits	
Utrecht Canvases	<a href="http://www.utrechtart.com">www.utrechtart.com</a>
Utrecht Brushes	
Open Box M pochade box	<a href="http://www.openboxm.com">www.openboxm.com</a>
Raymar wet panel carrier	<a href="http://www.raymarart.com">www.raymarart.com</a>
Sourcetek birch panels	<a href="http://www.canvaspanels.com">www.canvaspanels.com</a>
REI backpack	<a href="http://www.rei.com">www.rei.com</a>
REI fuel container ½ to full liter	
Large 24oz Holbein Brush washer or equivalent	
Collapsible small umbrella for plein air	
Small Manofrotto tripod, collapses to 18", strong	
View finder	<a href="http://www.viewcatcher.com">www.viewcatcher.com</a>
See suppliers:	<a href="http://www.judsonsart.com">www.judsonsart.com</a>