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Working from the landscape

Maggie Price describes to Sandra Carpenter the routine she follows to capture the light and landscapes of different countries in pastels

First published in *The Artist*, April 2007.
www.theartistmagazine.co.uk

GEAR ON LOCATION

"The more I paint outdoors the less I take with me, but it is important to have a good range of tone values in pastels. If you don't have enough darks, you don't have enough contrast in your lights, and vice versa. A good range of values is crucial. I like an assortment of very soft and very hard pastels, and use some from almost every manufacturer."

Easel: a lightweight camera tripod

Board

Masking tape

Paper

Pastels (each stick broken into half or thirds to fit in a relatively small box): six to ten different tone values of each of the primary colours (red, yellow, blue); secondary colours (orange, green, violet); tertiary colours (red-orange, yellow-orange, yellow-green, blue-green, red-violet, blue-violet); earth colours (browns, both warm and cool, and sand or beige colours); and neutrals, both warm and cool (grey-blue, grey-violet, grey-green, etc); one soft white (I prefer Schmincke); one black (semi-hard)

Carrying case for pastels

Tracing paper pad (to transport finished paintings)

Paper towels

Viewfinder

Moist wipes for cleanup

Hat, sunblock and insect spray

from my home, and of course the streams and lochs attract me."

Painting outdoors

When painting outdoors, capturing the lights means capturing the darks — and that means working quickly. "In the first ten minutes I lay in the major light and shadow shapes. I stick with where I started and don't try to move the shapes around as the shadows change. If you paint in the early morning or late afternoon those shadows may move in 20 minutes."

To settle into a new painting location, Maggie spends the first day walking around and looking at it, trying to decide what is different about the light.

"The first painting or two that I do in a new location are warm-ups as I am trying to understand what I am seeing. They may be awful, but I learn something from them. I do a few paintings a day. The more you work in an area, the better the painting becomes. The effect is cumulative as I learn the characteristics of the landscape and the colour of the light becomes familiar."

One of the most critical things that Maggie has learned about painting outdoors is that you cannot spend a lot of time on a single painting. She works small — 9×12in. — and spends no more than an hour and a quarter on a painting.

"If you try to go on longer, you start fighting the change in light and shadows.



The light moves and you soon find that you are not painting the subject you started. I take what I can get in an hour and I try to make it good. Even if I don't finish a painting, I will make sure I get accurate colours and tone values."

As she begins a painting, Maggie quickly determines her focal point and marks it on the paper. She also marks the edges of her scene, if only mentally. "I do a fast, loose sketch in soft fine charcoal on Wallis paper in Belgian mist tint, a neutral tone value, mounted on board. For the sketch I mark the major shapes and lines. Then I pick up my pastels and lay in the shadows and major shapes of light. I get as much as I can in accurate colour value and shape on the focal point and work out from there."

"My pastel box contains a selection of pastels with the wrappers removed and each stick broken in half or thirds. There are about 200 pieces of pastel, which allows me to paint for some weeks while travelling. If I don't have the right colour, I choose a stick of the correct value and temperature and it generally works. Or I can create a colour by layering.

View from Piazza Garibaldi, pastel, 8×10in. (20.3×25.4cm).

"Sometimes a warm-up painting works! This was done after a day of walking, taking photographs and sketching. As I had been to Italy before, I was able to familiarise myself more quickly with the landscape."

"I have learnt to stop before I think I am finished — I try to get 75 per cent done at this stage. If I feel I want to work on it more after I return to the studio, I ask myself if what I plan to do would change the painting for the better. If the answer is no, then I don't do it. I set it aside, look at it the next day and then ask myself if there is a flaw. If it can be fixed, I fix it. If not, I move on."

Future sights

Maggie's art career has had many twists and turns. She co-founded *The Pastel Journal* in 1999 and then sold it in 2003 to devote more time to her own painting. Her goals for the future include spending even more time painting. ▶



Rooftops, Juzcar, Spain, pastel, 8×10in. (20.3×25.4cm).

"I was fascinated by the white buildings and tiled roofs in the Genal valley in southern Spain. After several trial paintings on location, I finally began to catch a feeling for the tiled roofs. Too much detail would make them too fussy, but enough was needed to know what they were."



Bridge to the Castle, pastel, 8×10in. (20.3×25.4cm).

"There were too many tourists to allow me to get close to Eilean Donan Castle in the West Highlands of Scotland, so I decided to paint the bridge. I was particularly interested in catching the odd colour of the shallow water and the seaweed."

No matter where she is in the world, Maggie Price is passionate about painting the local scenery, whether at home in New Mexico, USA, or while travelling.

"Landscapes are my passion," says Maggie, "and it's important to paint what you love."

As she travels regularly to teach painting workshops all around the world, Maggie has a lot of opportunities for exploring her subject.

"I paint before, during and after my workshops. This routine has made me learn to see better as I break out of my usual processes. At home I tend to think I know what I see in front of me and don't pay attention as much as I should. But travelling and painting elsewhere sharpens up my ability to see accurately."

When Maggie first began painting, she worked only from photographs, but to learn more about how to paint the landscape, she soon started working outdoors. "You don't get the same feeling when you work from photos that you have when you get out there and do it," she says. "The landscape is the greatest teacher there is. I began referring to my outdoor work as colour studies to avoid worrying about whether am I producing a painting that is good enough to be framed. Letting go of that expectation has actually made my paintings better."

Maggie's goal when working outside is to paint the way the light describes the landscape. Once she has that information, she can translate it into a more detailed studio painting.

"I am probably in the studio slightly more than I am outdoors, as when I am on location I have to work quickly before the light changes," she says. "My outdoor work gives me the reference material I need to be able to paint in the studio. For instance, from my colour studies I



Cortona Hillside, pastel, 8×10in. (20.3×25.4cm).

"Early-morning rain had left a rising mist and lifting clouds. The light on the rooftop of the church lasted only minutes, so I painted it as soon as I saw it."

have accurate references for colour. Unless you're a professional photographer, none of your photos are colour accurate. When you work outdoors you know the colours from first-hand experience and can use them to create a better painting.

Finding a focus

"The landscape is so big and overwhelming that you can get lost and put too much in the painting," says Maggie. "It's important to find your focal point and stick to it. With my camera's viewfinder I isolate subjects and determine what my subject is. I also use a hand-held viewfinder to define the edges of the subject so as to not wander off and add extraneous details."

As she looks through her viewfinder, Maggie is searching for a contrast of light and dark, the shapes of the composition in general and how those shapes can move the viewer around the scene. Typical painting inspirations include patterns of light and shadow, interesting

shapes, movement and rhythm. "I love the shapes of rocks. I also love the movement of water and painting still water with reflections.

"My favourite painting spot is always the place where I have just been," she continues. "I get excited wherever I am. The Andalucian mountains in southern Spain are my favourite at present. The area is dry, like New Mexico, but the colours are different and I love the white buildings with their red and yellow tiled roofs. I am also still in love with Cortona in Italy. There is something intriguing about the warm light in those areas, and the villages with their old walls and buildings. I also love to paint the cool light in Scotland as it is very different

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Study of Buildings, Alpondere, Spain, pastel, 10×8in. (25.4×20.3cm).

"At the end of a wonderful day painting in the small village of Alpondere, I decided I had time for one more study. I began this painting of buildings where our group was to be picked up for transport back to our hotel. I didn't manage to finish before the bus came, but there was enough information in this study to use, along with a photograph, for creating a studio painting later."

"The great thing about being an artist is that you don't have to retire," she says. "I want to write more books — I have just finished one intended for the beginner that has helped me in my teaching. I want to continue teaching, as I do love sharing information on a personal level. It's great fun."

"I have worked in other mediums besides pastel, including oil and watercolour. But I am attracted to pastel because of the purity and luminosity of the colour. A pastel painting will still catch my eye from across the room and I have been working in the medium for 16 years. I can do things in pastel that I cannot do in other media. I feel there is a purity with pastel that doesn't shine through in other media."

Maggie Price

studied fine art at the University of Missouri. She is a member of the Pastel Society of America and was co-founder and editor of *The Pastel Journal*. She is a frequent juror of pastel competitions and teaches painting workshops around the world. Her work has been shown in many exhibitions and has won numerous awards. Her paintings have also been included in several books and her latest book *Painting With Pastel: Easy Techniques to Master the Medium* will be published in May by North Light Books. Her paintings can be seen on www.maggiepriceart.com.

DEMONSTRATION: Loch Duich



Reference photograph:

"For my painting I decided to leave out the fishing platform in the middle of the loch, as well as some of the seaweed debris near the bank. The camera makes the distant castle appear small and indistinct, but I could clearly see the tower and light hitting the side of the castle."



Setup

"I hung my bag from a bungee cord across the centre brace of the tripod in case of wind; my pastel box was strapped to its supporting shelf with another bungee cord. This may seem overcautious, but if a gust of wind came up, I would not be picking pastels out of the grass or fishing them from the loch!"

"I placed my easel so that the sun would not be shining on the paper. I did not have an umbrella, so if the sun struck the box of pastels I could have difficulty in selecting colours, as they would appear darker on the paper than in the box."



Drawing

"The initial drawing was very simple. I noted the major lines of the mountain, the bank of the water, the shape of the tree. A few important rocks were suggested, but nothing was set in stone at this point."



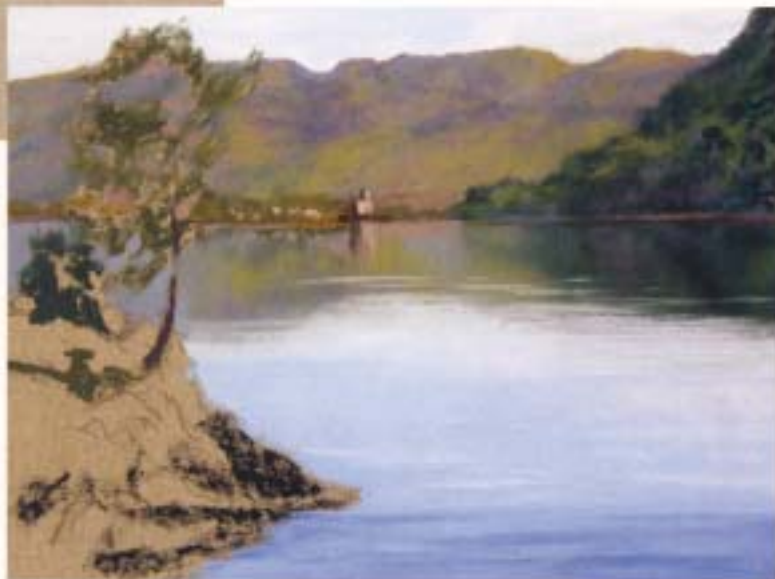
STAGE ONE

"As the colour and tone value of the sky affect the whole painting, I painted the sky first. The clouds may move as I work, but I paint them as they are and then leave them. Next, I blocked in the darker values."



◀ STAGE TWO

"I painted the distant mountains with several colours of the same tone value — blue, green and red — plus the darker blue-purple of the shadows. The closer mountain, darker in value, was painted mostly with greens, along with a little blue and purple in the shadows."



▶ STAGE THREE

"The reflections were painted in the same colours as the objects themselves, except that some darker values tend to be a little lighter when reflected. I blended the areas of reflections with a quick, firm stroke using the side of my finger. The colour of the water deepened as it came toward the foreground, as it was reflecting the darker zenith of the sky above."

▼ FINISHED PAINTING *Loch Dulich*, pastel, 8 × 10in. (20.3 × 25.4cm).

"The foreground bank on the left and the tree were quickly blocked in; I applied a final touch of highlight on the castle across the loch, and the painting was finished."

