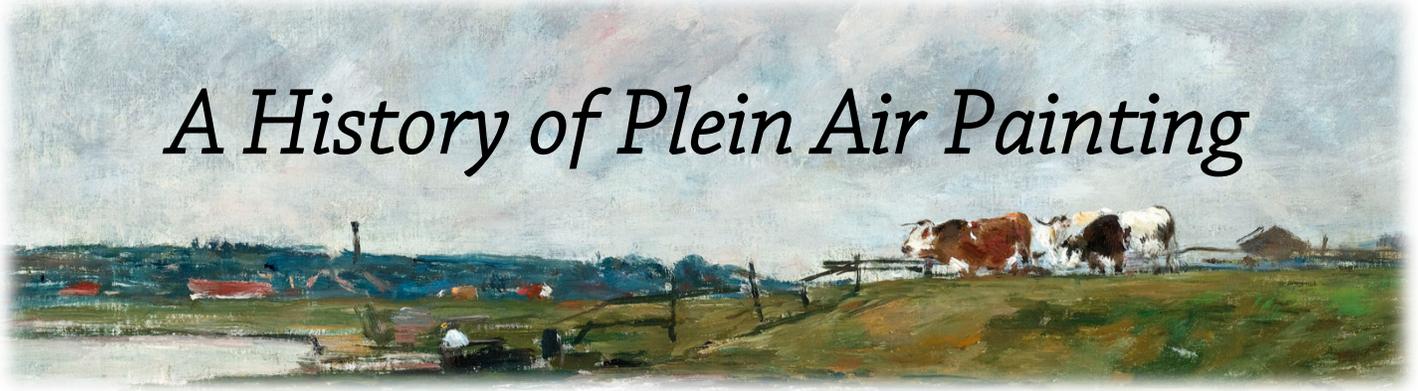


A History of Plein Air Painting



Few, if any, images surpass the power of the landscape to elicit a remarkable range of deep, visceral reactions. Sweeping mountainous panoramas or the peaks of a city skyline can cause a humbling swell of awe; smooth seas can evoke an inner sense of calm; and blooming gardens or fields of wild flowers can call forth feelings of pure joy. Painting *en plein air*, or “in the open air,” arose in response to this allure of nature in the seventeenth century, but its initial popularity was diminished due to the limited mobility of a painter’s equipment. Innovation overcame these challenges in the mid-nineteenth century, however, transforming *plein air* painting into a widely popular technique that revolutionized the artist’s approach to the landscape.

Plein air painting’s path began with the recognition of landscape painting as its own genre. Seventeenth-century artists such as Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665) and Claude Lorrain (1600-1628) made great strides in the development of the field, however it was the early nineteenth-century introduction of a course in landscape painting at the Parisian *Académie des Beaux Arts* that truly legitimized those artists dedicated to the intimate observation of the natural world. Artists thus renewed their interest in painterly examinations of light and atmosphere as it impacted various geographies. During these early years of the nineteenth century, though, landscape and

cityscape painters continued to work predominantly in the studio. Painting the landscape usually meant a sojourn into the countryside for a series of pencil or charcoal sketches to aid the artist in committing the scene to memory for later recall in paint on canvas once back in the studio.

This approach may seem counterintuitive today; in the early nineteenth century, though, it was the most practical, as artists were limited by the portability of painting materials. Oil paints, for example, existed only as artists mixed them on the palette. Pre-mixed oils, let alone oil paints in portable tubes, were yet an innovation of the future. So, to paint outside would have required a pre-mixed palette of paints that the artist would have to carry gingerly into nature hoping his or her pigments would not succumb to strong winds or sudden rains. Some artists experimented with rudimentary “tubes” made from pig’s bladders and glass syringes, however these proved almost equally as problematic as the open palette. Added to the difficulties in transporting paints was the maneuvering of an easel or other support on which to rest a canvas. The traditional painter’s easel was bulky and cumbersome, far from the contraption one would wish to lug into nature’s often uneven terrain.

Above: Detail from Eugene Boudin’s *Landscape with Cows*
Image Courtesy of M.S. Rau Antiques, New Orleans,
Louisiana

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These two principal limitations to *plein air* painting would be solved in the decades to come. The first, that of the easel, was overcome with the introduction of the box easel around the midpoint of the century. Designed specifically for easy transport, the box easel included a wooden box whose interior base was fitted with compartments for paints and supplies and whose lid was fitted with clips. When the lid was open, these clips would hold the artist's paper or board in place while he or she painted, allowing the compartments within the box to transform into a rudimentary palette. When the artist's painting session concluded, this lid could be closed, with the clips securing the wet work inside the box to protect it on the return home. This portability, amplified by the easel's telescoping legs, eased the pursuit of painting *en plein air*, particularly for artists such as John Constable (1776-1837).

Constable capitalized on this new device in his pursuit of *plein air* painting, conveying brilliantly in his canvases the subtleties of light and atmosphere throughout the rural English countryside and thereby securing his status as one of the most significant *plein air* painters of the nineteenth century. At virtually the same time, American artists of the Hudson River School, led by Thomas Cole (1801-1848) mirrored the European artistic exploration of the landscape. Their compositions explored majestic views of upstate New York that transformed the contemporaneous cultural consciousness of the power of the American landscape.

The second essential innovation was the development and eventual widespread distribution of pre-mixed oil paints. This

Jeff Herndon, *Artist in the Field*
Image © Gary Grace



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advance was thanks to the efforts of American John G. Rand, who was both a chemist and a portrait painter. Sharing in the struggle to preserve his paints, Rand developed a collapsible tin tube device that sealed completely with a screw cap. Rand's design ensured that no paint would be wasted, as the screw cap closure safeguarded the paint from drying out while the collapsible tube guaranteed every bit of paint could be extracted. Rand's invention, which he patented in both Europe and the United States in 1841, offered painters fully portable and preservable pigments for the first time, giving the artist a newfound freedom that was ultimately the catalyst to the artist's migration to the outdoor painting studio.

Thanks to these new technologies, by the century's end the popularity of painting *en plein air* had grown exponentially, with multiple colonies of artists flocking to nature to paint. In France, the painters of Barbizon adopted the nature surrounding the small village as their studio, creating majestic views characterized by the works of Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot (1796-1875) and Théodore Rousseau (1812-1867). Their *esprit* was carried forth by proto-Impressionist seascape painter Eugène Boudin (1824-1898) and the subsequent Impressionists, such as Claude Monet (1840-1926) and Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841-1919). The Impressionist *plein air* approach to landscapes and cityscapes allowed for the hallmark luminescent atmospheric effects in their paintings. In England, the Newlyn painters, led by Stanhope



Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Brittany Landscape (Paysage de Bretagne)*, circa 1892
Image Courtesy of M.S. Rau Antiques, New Orleans, Louisiana

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Forbes (1857-1947), devoted their *plein air* canvases to breathtaking study of the English Cornwall coast and the rural culture that inhabited it.

Virtually simultaneous with *plein air* painting's explosion in Europe was its continued expansion in the United States. In the early years of the twentieth century, for example, Paris-trained painter and pioneering American Impressionist Childe Hassam (1859-1935) transformed the Old Lyme Art Colony of Connecticut into an "American Giverny," recalling Monet's iconic home and gardens in northern France. Within a short period of time the Old Lyme Art Colony had itself become an outpost of Impressionism, and correspondingly *plein air* painting. At the same time, across the continent, *plein air* painting had become a hallmark of Californian painting, with a circle of artists known as the "California Impressionists." These artists, such as Guy Rose (1867-1925), who himself studied with Monet in Giverny, transformed the dynamic California landscape through vibrant color and atmospheric ethereality. In doing so, these artists established a West Coast *plein air* painting tradition this is maintained today.

Plein air painting continues to grow in popularity, with painting organizations dedicated to its practice arising around the world. Conjuring mountain views to city streets, *plein air* painting allows the artist to firsthand study of the environment, ensuring a compositional vivacity that is difficult to achieve in studio-crafted works. Perhaps more importantly, the technique of painting *en plein air* is remarkably dynamic. For as much as it is a technique centered on the individual, in that each artist captures a unique moment of engagement with the environment on the canvas, it also reflects universal themes or emotions to which all viewers can relate.

It is for these reasons that the Dexter Arts, Culture and Heritage Committee seeks to encourage the community's exploration of the *plein air* technique through the Paint Dexter *Plein Air* Festival. The Committee encourages you to attend this year's festival to celebrate both the natural beauty of Dexter's picturesque surroundings as well as regional artists who so masterfully commit these views to canvas. Whether attending as admirer or as artist, as novice or as professional, your enchantment with *plein air*'s power is inevitable.

- Alexis R. Culotta,
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Visitors at Paint Dexter *Plein Air* Festival Exhibit