

Motives of Discovery

by Gavin Brooks

When we set up an easel we usually have a pretty good idea of what we want our subject matter to be. Perhaps a strong tree shape or pattern has caught our eye. On the east coast where I live, reflections of boats, marsh and water patterns are always popular subjects.

The colors and shapes of boats, buildings and other man-made objects can be exciting material for compositions. This has always attracted a lot of painterly attention over the centuries, such as the complex and colorful harbor scenes of Emile Gruppé. I especially admire his loaded brush and bold descriptions of New England scenery. While I can appreciate his technique and his characteristic choice of figurative themes, I seem to end up at my own easel more often in the pristine woods, empty coasts and rugged mountains. I've often wondered, if I admire Gruppé so much, why are my paintings about undisturbed natural places? For some artists this choice can simply be about avoiding drawing challenges such as architectural lines or figures. Yet, I developed good drawing skills in art school, studied human anatomy and can render literal and linear subjects well. Maybe my selections have something to do with inspiration?

I am drawn to painting the posture of trees, curving riverbanks and rolling grass meadows. I find hidden architecture and form in nature where there is little human presence. I just like being in those places. Over time, I have developed this consistent leaning towards pristine, unspoiled landscapes. I enjoy time in the wilderness even when I am not painting.



By choosing these locations, I have grown more intrigued with the mood-inducing elements of air, light and temperature. If light in nature remains the catalyst for a host of human emotions and spirituality, then we can understand why the Hudson River School painters such as Bierstadt, Cole, Moran and Kennsett were so dedicated to this aspect of painting. The landscape luminists of that time didn't paint large works *alla prima* as many of the plein air painters do today. They studied outdoors, gathered inspiration and went back to the studio to compose an emotional commentary about what they saw. Today's modern plein air painters more often follow the techniques of the early 20th-century Eucalyptus School in California where



the emphasis was on craftsmanship. This technique produced straightforward paintings distinctive by their decorative shapes and opaque color. To address air and temperature, the artists subdued intense color with muted grays. Some critics still consider these paintings purely decorative and others find them important works of the period. Most agree, that after the vibrating dabs of Impressionism, this bolder approach was new and exciting.

With atmospheric subject matter, I often find myself revisiting the classical luminist techniques I studied in atelier school, yet, I am learning to do this without abandoning the straightforward techniques of those early California painters. In this way, I am discovering a hybrid style of my own. This ongoing experiment is driven by my personal choice in subject. My discoveries in painting are caused by something I keep seeing in nature.

For instance, last week I walked out onto a low beach in California on a sunny winter morning. There the Pacific was pounding in my ears and above, the high cliffs in shadow loomed through saturated veils of golden vapor. The wet sand glistened bright with sparkling jewels of light. All of it was surreal behind low mists of sea salt and eucalyptus-infused air. How can a plein air painter work towards capturing such intangibles? I am still thinking about how I will paint this scene.

There is so much to pay attention to in nature, in order to choose a specific subject, it does help me to better understand my motives. If we can identify and arrange our own interpretation of the scenery, we can tell a more personal story and perhaps share our inspiration. For instance, one night last spring in North Carolina I went out to the beach during a full moon. The scene (top, page

1) presented me with so many choices: People out in the warm summer evening with dogs and children. Big beach houses with their dark shapes stretching for a long curve along the dune line. Thin land swung out into the horizon line lit by a hundred lights across the water. The moonlit surf was blue white against a silver sky. In my painting, I placed the moon where its reflection would provide a soft glow around a few carefully selected figures at the surf line. I decided the rest of the painting had to be quiet to impart a reflective mood. Sometimes air can say as much as objects.

I made another painting the next day at dawn from the same exact spot (bottom, page1). This small study explored the colors of early morning. The literal elements of each scene are identical but I wanted each painting to capture completely different notes for time and temperature.

The main theme of these two paintings is the saturation of atmosphere. I find it is worth my time to pre-mix colors and contemplate my design so that each painting can achieve its purpose—mood. I decided to leave out big shapes describing the houses and lights and let the saturated atmosphere dominate the scene. Huge open areas with little information give a sense of space and quiet repose. I worked with layers of thin paint in glazes to capture the depth of miles. In some areas, I used a medium to speed drying and create thinner areas of luminosity. In other areas, such as the surf line, the paint is thick with impasto.

Knowing my own sentiment for the subject drives my technique. The more time I spend painting, the more I learn about what works to support this inspiration. The rules for how I might

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combine different painting techniques to achieve expression are always evolving. Knowing myself as an artist and what moves me to capture the mystery of atmospheric light carries those decisions.

I could never find my full capacity as an artist if I decided to mimic the colorful boating subjects of Emile Gruppé, the airy trees of George Inness, or the pink deserts that moved Maynard Dixon. Even though I love the works of so many artists past and present, I am careful to understand and contain my admiration. Great popular paintings by another artist pursuing his own personal truth can lead me to distraction—like a path away from myself. Indifference is evident in my work when I allow myself to pursue a tangent or technique that has nothing to do with me.

I can't argue that a competent artist with a technical proficiency for boats, hotel bartenders, cowboys or Native American culture can't deliver a decent stream of works. What history reveals is that some artists can enter into meaningful discovery and possibly even greatness when following personal inspiration. What makes a painter continue to reach beyond his or her own understanding? Perhaps the important questions are not "Who is your favorite artist?" or "What's your color theory?" or "What sells better?" but rather, "What moves you?" The right techniques will follow when we begin to know that.

